

Acknowledgments

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Dès l'instant où l'homme soumet
Dieu au jugement moral, il le
tue en lui-même.

Albert Camus
L'Homme Révolté

INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century was--it has often been expressed--an age of doubt: "Doubt, which . . . ever hangs in the background of our world," complained Carlyle, "has now become our middle-ground and foreground; whereon, for the time; no fair Life-picture can be painted, but only the dark air-canvas itself flow round us, bewildering and benighting." Religion, "the crown and all-supporting keystone of the fabric" of society had crumbled and hence, "innumerable men, blinded in their minds; must 'live without God in the world.'"¹

Algernon Charles Swinburne distinguished himself from his bewildered and benighted contemporaries in that he was never to experience the theological trauma of his age. From his early years, the poet was an inveterate atheist. Enjoying the philosophical solemnity of his "clarified nihilism,"² as he termed it, Swinburne stood conspicuously aloof, lucidly observing the insidious contagion of anguish and confusion on his godforsaken confrères, and having none of it.

¹ "Characteristics"/1831/; rpt. in The Best Known Works of Thomas Carlyle (New York: Harcourt, 1942), pp. 329-30, 319-20, 326.

² Cecil Y. Lang, ed., The Swinburne Letters, 6 vols. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), III, 14. Hereafter cited as Letters.

From this privileged vantage point, Swinburne could observe Tennyson struggling against doubt, desperately seeking refuge in a conciliatory "natural theology" or alternately resorting to a Pascalian "religion du coeur." Arnold, too, could be seen wandering in that existential absurdity and vagueness which he felt was the burden of a godless world; painfully working his way toward "the natural truth of Christianity."³ Swinburne could also follow Arthur Hugh Clough's theological meanderings as he attempted, his "Affections all unfixed," to reconcile an obsessive scepticism with the ineluctable fact that "God, unidentified, was thought-of still."⁴ And Swinburne could also discern, albeit in a neglected corner of the Victorian poetical scene, James Thomson's dismal depictions of the devastated spiritual "modern landscape." The "laureate of pessimism," as he was called by his friends, was virtually substantiating Ruskin's perception of the enveloping "cloudiness" emanating from the "want of faith" and was, in fact, making his "boast in blackness":⁵

³ Preface to Last Essays on Church and Religion/1877; rpt. in Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold, ed. A. Dwight Culler (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 503.

⁴ "Blank Misgivings of a Creature moving about in Worlds not realized"/18627; rpt. in The Poems of Arthur Hugh Clough 2nd ed., ed. F.L. Mulhauser (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), p. 28.

⁵ "Of Modern Landscape"/18567; rpt. in The Genius of John Ruskin: Selections from His Writings, ed. John D. Rosenberg (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), pp. 84, 88, 86.

Black disbelief, substantial doubt
 Wreath--blent into one lowering cloud
 Through which Heaven's light can scarce
 shine out
 Round all the Faiths: all in such shroud
 Fade ghostlike to th'entombing Past:
 Our Heaven is wildly overcast.⁶

And although Thomson, too, strove to emerge from the enshrouding despair resulting from God's absence, his strenuous efforts were in vain; all he attained/was "renewed assurance / And confirmation of the old despair" ("The City of Dreadful Night"/1874, p. 205).

While most of his poetic contemporaries, with the notable exception of Edward FitzGerald, were having to cope with the burden of belief or the vicissitudes of doubt, Swinburne was mustering his poetic verve to depict and condemn the self-delusion and self-abnegation which he deemed as inherent in the belief in God. The "enfant terrible" of the nineteenth century was paving his way toward a philosophical poetry which would vehemently proclaim his "Hymn of Man": "Glory to Man in the highest! for Man is the master of things."⁷

⁶ "Suggested by Matthew Arnold's 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse'"/1884; rpt. in Poems and some Letters of James Thomson, ed. Anne Ridler (London: Centaur, 1963), p. 7.

⁷ The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne, 6 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1972), II, 104. All further references to Swinburne's poems, unless otherwise specified, are to this edition and appear in the text in the following form: volume number, page number.

Swinburne was incontestably an atheist; from his early years to his death, the poet unwaveringly maintained--more than his antitheism or anticlericalism--his atheism. In a letter to E.C. Stedman, dated "(February 21), 1875," Swinburne resolves to elucidate the "babble" about his antitheism by expounding "what I really do think on religious matters":

Having been as child and boy brought up a quasi-Catholic, of course I went in for that as passionately as for other things (e.g. well-nigh to unaffected and unshamed ecstasies of adoration); then when this was naturally stark dead and buried, it left nothing to me but a turbid nihilism: for a Theist I never was; I always felt by instinct and perceived by reason that no man could conceive of a personal God except by brute Calibanic superstition or else by true supernatural revelation; that a natural God was the absurdest of all human figments. . . . This, I say, I have always seen and avowed since my mind was ripe enough to think freely. (Letters, III, 13)

Swinburne then adds that "we who worship no material incarnation of any qualities, no person, may worship the divine <man> humanity, the ideal of human perfection and aspiration, without worshipping any God, any person, any fetish at all. . . . Perhaps you will think this is only clarified nihilism, but at least it is no longer turbid" (p. 14).

Several critics have contended with Swinburne's epistolary clarity and his emphatic assurance that he was "in no sense a Theist"⁸

⁸ Letters, III, p. 14. It should be noted that Swinburne's correspondence contains a plethora of statements and facetious remarks which substantiate his atheism.

as they endeavoured to decipher, in the theological harangues of his poetry, a cryptic sign of orthodoxy or at least, of agnosticism. William R. Rutland is certainly the foremost sceptic; upon perusal of the letter cited above, the critic insists:

We have no evidence to disprove him; but his own writings supply us with overwhelming evidence that he was no Atheist. When he wrote Atalanta he believed passionately in a God . . . without a god he could not be; but the god he believed in was not good but evil. He did not love God; he cursed; but he went on believing almost in spite of himself.⁹

Rutland then submits that "The most significant aspect of the attack upon religion in Atalanta in Calydon is that it is, if the contradiction may be permitted, itself essentially religious" (p. 133).

This argument stems from the well-known rationale that blasphemy and defiance presuppose a belief in the existence of the assailed object. J.K. Huysmans' more notable delineation of this logic, in A Rebours, should be evoked. Expanding on his perception of "le sadisme, ce bâtard du catholicisme,"¹⁰ Huysmans reasons:

⁹ Swinburne, A Nineteenth Century Hellene... (Oxford: Blackwell, 1931; rpt. n.p.: Folcroft, 1970), p. 132.

¹⁰ A Rebours (1884); rpt. with an introd. by Pierre Waldner (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1978), p. 190. Huysmans' usage of the term "sadisme" is confined to the description of Sade's theological blasphemies. In this thesis, the term "Sadian" is used to qualify the various themes in Sade's literary works; while the term "sadistic" retains its "perverse" connotations.

En effet, s'il ne comportait point un sacrilège, le sadisme n'aurait pas de raison d'être; d'autre part, le sacrilège qui découle de l'existence même d'une religion, ne peut être intentionnellement et pertinemment accompli que par un croyant. (p. 191)

This rationale has been adopted by critics who would perceive in Swinburne's antitheistic and Sadian tirades, an intrinsic theism. Certainly, Swinburne's denunciation of "the supreme evil, God" in Atalanta necessarily implies the existence of a God; yet this implication is purely dramatic and cannot, in Swinburne's case, be interpreted as a personal theistic avowal. To infer from this utterance that Swinburne believed in God would be analogous to the preposterous allegation that Blake was a votary of "Urizen."

In order to topple idols, one must first acknowledge their concrete presence; only then can they be unveiled and their meretriciousness exposed. And thus Swinburne was merely exposing in Atalanta the malignance and inviability of the theistic rationale, thereby attempting to render precarious the stability of the belief in an idol. Georges Lafourcade succinctly explicates the motive which led Swinburne, an atheist, to poetically revile "God":

Pourquoi, demande-t-on, Swinburne prend-il la peine d'accuser, d'insulter, et presque d'égorger un Dieu dans lequel il professe de ne pas croire? La question témoigne d'un certain manque de réflexion ou d'imagination: ce Dieu personnel n'est, pour Swinburne,

qu'une hypothèse; le théisme est pour lui un système intenable et faux. . . . Ayant donc à cœur de démontrer l'inanité du théisme, il entreprend de représenter, dans Atalanta, la conclusion logique à laquelle est amenée l'âme de celui qui croit en un Dieu personnel: désespoir, blasphèmes, révoltes. Il ne dit pas avec Voltaire: "Si Dieu n'existait pas, il faudrait l'inventer", mais bien: "Si Dieu existait, il faudrait l'insulter". Et Swinburne n'est pas plus croyant que Voltaire n'était athée.¹²

Swinburne's dramatization of what he personally deemed to be nothing but a mental construct, an ens rationis, was geared toward the annihilation of this construct. He had been inspired, in the adoption of this tactic, by Sade, Blake and Shelley who had analogously embodied the traditional concept of God in order to negate the alleged existence of that divine being.¹² Swinburne emulated these men who, in order to effectively fight their respective theological battles, had armed themselves with various expressions of belief (myth, gospel, religious rhetoric, or simply the formulation of belief) from which they temporarily borrowed the spirit or the letter, or both, so as to communicate intelligibly their own expurgated or inverted versions.

¹¹ La Jeunesse de Swinburne (1837-1867), 2 vols. (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1928), II, 397. Hereafter cited as La Jeunesse.

¹² Unlike Sade and Shelley, Blake was an ardent believer in God. His poeticized protest was directed at the erroneous conception of God perpetuated by traditional Judeo-Christian theology; he thus gave a "body" to this "Falshood" and called it "Urizen." Throughout this thesis only Blake's contrivance of "Urizen" is alluded to.

Inversion does not necessarily presuppose adherence to the original version, but certainly an awareness of, and aversion for, the original. To Huysmans' observation that "l'homme n'éprouverait aucune allégresse à profaner une loi qui lui serait ou indifférente ou inconnue" (A Rebours p. 191), it may be retorted that neither Swinburne nor Sade, Blake or Shelley was indifferent to or ignorant of theistic "law." They were fully cognizant of the potency of the belief in God and the intensity of their revolt was fuelled, not by any abhorrence of God, but by their pity or contempt for those weak or despicable enough to perpetuate the veneration of a non-entity. Consequently, their iconoclastic blows were not aimed futilely at a non-existent God; but effectively, at theistic minds. Sade voices his disdain for the mythopoeic intellect that forges its own fetters in the contrivance of a "God":

L'idée d'une telle chimère est, je l'avoue, le seul tort que je ne puisse pardonner à l'homme; je l'excuse dans tous ses écarts, je le plains de toutes ses faiblesses, mais je ne puis lui passer l'érection d'un tel monstre, je ne lui pardonne pas de s'être forgé lui-même les fers religieux qui l'ont accablés si violemment, et d'être venu présenter lui-même le cou sous le joug honteux qu'avait préparé sa bêtise. ¹³

¹³ Marquis de Sade, La Nouvelle Justine ou Les Malheurs de la vertu, suivie de L'Histoire de Juliette, sa soeur, ou Les Prospérités du vice/1791, 1798/; rpt. in vols. VI-IX of Oeuvres Complètes du Marquis de Sade /Édition définitive établie sur les originaux imprimés ou mss./, (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1962-64), VIII, 30. All further references are to this edition and appear in the text in the following form: Justine VI or VII, or Juliette VIII or IX, page number.

The non-existence of God does not, in any way, preclude the potency of the construct which owes its devastating actualization, so to speak, to a ubiquitous "faith." For all of its conceptuality, "God" must be reckoned with as an ominous adversary. "Thought made him," Swinburne will later say of "God" in "Hertha," (II, 79) thereby expressing--beyond his awareness that God is but a mental fabrication--the vitality of this construct.

This thesis will endeavour to show that Swinburne's poetical contrivance of a God in Atalanta was prompted by three motives--the Classical, the iconoclastic and the existential motive. The iconoclastic motive may be summoned in the present discussion to exonerate Swinburne from the charge of theism persistently laid against him in the light of his assailment of "the supreme evil, God" in Atalanta. Swinburne was merely following the iconoclastic prescription so eloquently phrased by William Blake: "Giving a body to Falshood that it may be cast out forever."¹⁴

The multifarious themes and the Classical constitution of Atalanta in Calydon have consistently occupied critics since the

¹⁴ *Jerusalem/1804-?1820?; rpt. in The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman (1965; New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 153. All further references to Blake's poetry are to this edition and appear in the text in the following form: title of poem, page number.

play's publication in 1865--its delineation of familial relationships; its sado-erotic vein; its biographical import; its Classical nature; its denunciation of the malignance of love; its expression of natural-cosmic tragedy; its insight into human communication and psychology; its problematic theology--all have been probed.¹⁵

It seems hardly feasible to entertain this myriad of themes within the Classical circumscription of a play. And yet, Swinburne managed not only to broach but to expound coherently these versatile and complex issues. He achieved this through the use of an

¹⁵ For pertinent discussion of *Atalanta's* respective themes, these works may be consulted: on familial relationships: Morse Peckham, "Eroticism = Politics: Politics = Eroticism," in Victorian Revolutionaries . . . (New York: Braziller, 1970), pp. 235-305, and the same author's Introduction in Algernon Charles Swinburne: Poems and Ballads and Atalanta in Calydon (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1970), pp. xi-xxxv; on sadism: Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony, 2nd ed. trans. Angus Davidson (1951; rpt. New York: Meridian, 1956), pp. 223-226; on biographical import: Jean Overton Fuller, Swinburne: A Critical Biography (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968); on Classical sources and features: Marion Clyde Wier, The Influence of Aeschylus and Euripides on the Structure and Content of Swinburne's Atalanta in Calydon and Erechtheus, Diss. (Michigan: Wahr, 1920); on love: Richard Matthews, "Heart's Love and Heart's Division: The Quest for Unity in *Atalanta in Calydon*," VP, 9, Nos. 1-2 (Spring-Summer 1971), pp. 35-48; on cosmic tragedy: David G. Riede, Swinburne: A Study of Romantic Mythmaking (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1978); on communication and psychology, the two works by Peckham cited above might be consulted as well as Jerome J. McGann's Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972); and on *Atalanta's* theology, George Lafourcade's "La Théologie d'*Atalanta*" (pp. 389-403) in La Jeunesse has yet to be surpassed.

intricately polysemous rhetoric whereby a single one of the discourses mentioned above signifies--in addition to itself--other discourses.¹⁶

In some cases, this semantic transaction is limited to a few discourses; for instance, a constituent of the Classical discourse, the "broken house" image, albeit emerging late in the play, is--from antecedent semantic interplay--immediately recognized as simultaneously informing the natural-cosmic, familial, psychological and biographical discourses. Hence, as the Chorus comes to utter the ominous words: "The house is broken, is broken, it shall not stand" (p. 312), these discourses have been sufficiently correlated to secure the multiple implication of the verse: beyond its initial import that the Calydonian household or hearth is in impending ruin, the disintegration of the familial nucleus; Althaea's psychological capitulation; Swinburne's own circumstantial disarray as well as an enveloping cosmic chaos, are conveyed.

¹⁶ In this thesis, the term "discourse" denotes a stretch of rhetoric which is semantically unified or, as Dominique Maingueneau puts it, in Initiation aux méthodes de l'analyse du discours, (p. 11): "un message pris globalement . . . outre son sens-concensus /le discours a/ une signification spécifique (Paris: Hachette, 1976).

More extensively, the "brand" symbol runs the gamut of discourses: its operative semantic malleability allows it to transcend its original Classical value, adapting it, as it were, to each of the other discursive contexts. Inasmuch as a single discourse is thus designed to serve itself and others, a rhetorical economy ensues; but the more significant result of this discursive correspondence is an all-encompassing uniformity.

The polysemy which promotes and sustains the discursive ramifications of the rhetoric is paradoxically reflective of a semantic cohesion. The "brand" symbol may be used to illustrate this proposition: its inherent thematic elasticity which enables it to signify--beyond its mythological "existence" and attributes--the contiguity of birth and death (in the natural-cosmic and theological discourses); of pleasure and pain (in the sado-erotic discourse); of passion and extinction of passion (in the discourse on love); of the life and death-giving Mother (in the familial and psychological discourses), simultaneously translates an essential consistency underlying this diversity of meanings. This fundamental consistency, rhetorically transmitted by the verbal oneness of "brand," semantically relates the pervasion of paradox.¹⁷ It is then, in fact, this

¹⁷ The contiguity of life and death may be seen as equally permeative but not nearly as comprehensive: it is a constituent "paradox."

portentous coherence which is the inherent leitmotif of the "brand" symbol and all contextual connotations are designed but to accentuate the omnipresence of this verity.

All of the play's discourses culminate in, or rather emanate from, such unifying intelligibility. The global referential field is, however, more animated: it includes, with the pervasion of paradox, the ubiquity of evil and death.

The exclusive preoccupation of this thesis is the theological discourse. It has nevertheless become evident that the extraction of a single discourse from the rhetorical corpus is intricately complicated by discursive interdependence. This discussion will then necessarily be subject to digressions; yet these will be limited to the essentially enlightening and corroborative participation of the Classical, biographical and natural-cosmic discourses.

In this delimitative light, the theological discourse can be brought to focus and properly scrutinized. The ensuing examination reveals that the polysemy which supports the play's discursive ramifications is similarly operative within the bounds of this single discourse. More significant is the revelation issuing from the analysis of the 'internal' ramifications: they represent the motives which had prompted Swinburne to enunciate the theological discourse in the first place. That is, the Classical, the iconoclastic and the existential motives are poetically delineated in the corresponding

tripartite semantic ramification of the theological discourse.

Of the three, the only explicit motive justifying the divine presence in Atalanta is the Classical. Atalanta's "God" ineluctably owes His "existence" to Swinburne's manifest desire and efforts to reanimate the Classical theological spirit. However, the Judeo-Christian character of Swinburne's "supreme evil, God" and the unclassical excess of the Chorus' vituperations signal the presence of a more comprehensive, if less explicit, motive. As it becomes clear that Swinburne's sacrilegious tirades address no God at all, but the constraining and destructive construct of theism; antitheism becomes iconoclasm. Couched in the articulate arraignment of a God is the subtle and more philosophical assailment of an icon.

An explication of the third alleged motive--the existential--requires the exposition of biographical data. Inasmuch as the present discussion is but a preliminary outline, the formulation of a hypothesis should suffice. Depressing circumstances, synchronous with Swinburne's composition of Atalanta, stirred the poet to existential anguish and awareness: this state of mind informs and partly justifies the theological discourse.¹⁸

¹⁸ The problem of anachronism will be discussed in the chapter devoted to "The Existential Motive."

The polysemous rhetoric which qualifies God simultaneously invokes existential tribulations. This does not imply a causality whereby God is deemed the source of existential vicissitudes; the Classical discourse sufficiently vents this perspective. The theological rhetoric is existentially constituted: that is, the depiction of God and human victimization is rendered in existential terminology, revolving around the themes of paradox, contingency, arbitrariness and death. Swinburne's apprehension of the supremacy of these existential burdens is, so to speak, secular; it does not semantically combine with the Classical theological discourse, but in fact philosophically supersedes it.

This evokes a crucial point. Whereas the interaction of the play's discourses is a supportive one--the various discourses meaningfully sustaining each other--the ramifications of the theological discourse semantically negate one another. Albeit they are incumbent on a single rhetoric, they are semantically independent and irreconcilable. The Classical discourse is reliant on the existence of God; the iconoclastic discourse hinges on the belief in a God, while purporting "His" non-existence; and the existential discourse is provoked by the awareness of the supremacy of chance, paradox, contingency, arbitrariness and death, as well as by the overwhelming feeling of cosmic alienation. Each discourse indicts its own "supreme evil" and in this sense, the only cohesive reciprocity--beyond that of a single rhetoric--is the same that unites the totality of discourses;

that which emanates from the fundamental uniform meaning of the rhetoric: the ubiquity of evil, paradox and death. Only in this permeating consistency do the semantic ramifications of the theological discourse converge.

CHAPTER 1

The Classical Motive

The Classical motive--Swinburne's resolution to recapture the elements of ancient Greek theology--is basically responsible for the poet's contrivance of a God in Atalanta. Had "God" been absent from the play's referential scheme, Swinburne could never have hoped to reanimate the Hellenic spirit. His genuine and frantic desire to reproduce the substance of Classical theology demanded that he be necessarily attentive to Classical religiosity; that Swinburne did pay attention is evinced by the resonance, echoing from the play's acutest antitheistic tirades, of an unequivocal theism.¹

Whether Swinburne succeeded or not in his emulative endeavour does not, in any way, alter the intensity and validity of the Classical motive; or, his conviction that he had respected and transmitted the Greek spirit in Atalanta. On "March 15, 1865," approximately a month following the publication of his play, he wrote to Lady Pauline Trevelyan:

I think it [Atalanta] is pure Greek, and the first poem of the sort in modern times, combining lyric and dramatic work on the old principle. Shelley's Prometheus is magnificent and un-Hellenic, spoilt too, in my mind, by the

¹ In contrast, for instance, to Shelley's Prometheus Unbound where "Jupiter" is explicitly described as a construct.

infusion of philanthropic doctrinaire views and 'progress of the species'; and by what I gather from Lewes' life of Goethe the Iphigenia in Tauris must be also impregnated with modern morals and feelings. As for Professor Arnold's Merope the clothes are well enough but where has the body gone? So I thought, and still think, the field was clear for me. (Letters, I, 115)

It is then evident that Swinburne's desire to conceive "the first . . . modern" version of Greek tragedy had fundamentally enticed him to compose the figure of "the supreme evil, God." He did not consider that such a portrayal of "God" adulterated the "pure Greek" quality of his play or that he had, in any other way, misrepresented the Classical spirit. In a letter to Lord Houghton in which Swinburne facetiously poses as a student about to be "swished for his verses," he proudly confesses his profanatory misdemeanour, but categorically rejects the contention that such sacrilegious defiance is not in keeping with the "Greek":

As to my quantities and metre and rule
of rhythm and rhyme, I defy castigation
. . . The moral and religious question
I give up at once. I let down my breeches,
pull up my shirt, and kneel down (for the
hundredth time) on the flogging block,
without a word. If you apply a rod
soaked in brine for that offence I
confess I deserve it. I did shirk
Chapel. I did take to profane swearing
instead of singing in the choir. I am
fully prepared for a jolly good swishing
in consequence. I can't complain if you
take my name out of the list for Confirmation
and insert it in the flogging-bill.
Only don't say with my old friend in the
Spectator that it isn't Greek--because it
is. I recognize in that attack the avenging
hand of outraged virtue, mindful how nearly

that paper was induced, through a shameless trick (I was in the fourth form then, you know), to admit into its chaste pages a flaming eulogy of M. le marquis de Sade.²

And in a letter to William Bell Scott, dated "March 15 /1865_7,"

Swinburne also denounced the "Christian" interpretation of Atalanta:

"I observe also with due joy that neither of you /Scott and Lady Trevelyan_7 seem to object to what the unwise Christian slaves of faith and fear characterize as blasphemous rebellion against their Supreme Being."³

Swinburne's insistence on disregarding what most critics have consistently assessed as a heterodox divergency from the Classical theological perspective did not stem from any spurious motive.⁴ He was genuinely convinced that he had not transgressed the norms of Hellenic piety in his Atalanta. This assurance resulted from the fact that Swinburne was a subjective reader and critic who would, unconsciously

² Letters, I, 121; letter dated "/ca. April 20, 1865_7".

³ Letters, I, 114. Lady Trevelyan had written elogiously on Atalanta to Scott on March 13; the latter replied the next day: "About Algernon's poem . . . it is the most pure and perfect work of the kind in English . . . It has its peculiarities as indicating certain questionable characteristics of the author, but the paganism and the license are quite right to his classical subject, and give truth and value to every page" (Letters, I, 113n). This should be noted as perhaps the only commentary on Atalanta which does not consider its "license" as a Classical aberration.

⁴ Clyde K. Hyder relates that although most "Reviews" did not perceive Atalanta's heterodoxy until Lord Houghton "pointedly referred to its 'bitter and angry anti-theism'" in The Edinburgh Review (the passage in which this phrase appears will be cited later), "The Spectator and The Times were aware that the religious tone of the play was not Greek" (Intro., The Critical Heritage /London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970_7, pp. xv-xvi).

it seems, project his own propensities on the works of authors he admired.⁵ It appears that this was an inveterate inclination in Swinburne, for over forty years later, he would say of Sophocles, whose attitude is traditionally recognized as one of "unquestioning faith,"⁶ that:

. . . the haughty and daring protest or appeal in which Sophocles, speaking through the lips of virtuous Hyllus, impeaches and denounces the iniquity of Heaven with a steadfast and earnest vehemence [is] unsurpassed in its spoken rebellion by any modern questioner or blasphemer of divine providence.⁷

Swinburne, of whom Lang says that "No poet has been more immersed . . . in the Greek classics,"⁸ was clearly attributing his own point of view to Sophocles.

Where he admired, Swinburne was inclined to find or contrive affinities, and, conversely, he refuted alleged parallels between the work of a writer he disliked and his own. An example is his notable aversion to Euripides, which Rutland qualifies as "perhaps his most

⁵ This will be elaborated in the following chapter; particularly in relation to Swinburne's analysis of William Blake.

⁶ Arthur S. Way, trans., *Introd., Euripides*, 4 vols. (1912; rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959), I, xi. All further references to the plays of Euripides are to this edition and will appear in the text in the following form: volume number, page number.

⁷ *The Age of Shakespeare [1908]*; rpt. in *The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, 20 vols., ed. Sir Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise (Bonchurche Edition 1925; rpt. New York: Russell, 1968), XI, 432.

⁸ In his *Introduction to Letters*, I, xv.

striking critical perversity" (p. 167). Swinburne vehemently rejected any critical rapprochement with the poet whom he deemed "troubled with a dysentery of poetical imagination and a diarrhoea of rhetorical sophistry"; "there are but two--tragic poets!" exclaimed Swinburne. (Letters, III, 100), thereby dismissing the defiant spirit most likely to justify Atalanta's theological license; for "if we can find anything in Greek drama akin to the atmosphere of Atalanta," submits Rutland, "it is most certainly in Euripides" (p. 167). This corroborates Marion Clyde Wier's assertion that "the whole outlook of the Chorus / in Atalanta / is Euripidean / rather than Aeschylean /" (p. 19).

Rather than establish kinship with Euripides, Swinburne allowed his reverence for Sophocles to mold his interpretation of the latter's theological affront. He thus vested in the tragedian's "protest" an added dimension, alien to it but indubitably of Swinburnian origin. Swinburne's apprehension of the Hellenic spirit, however commendable in all other respects, was tainted in the theological realm with his own impious colouring: in the religious tirades of Greek tragedy, the poet perceived an excessive rebelliousness and irreverence, which, he believed, matched his own. Accordingly, he was convinced, while composing Atalanta, that he was respecting the spirit of Hellenic piety. Whatever the result, Swinburne had earnestly been heedful of his Classical motive; so "don't say . . . that it isn't Greek," was his confident reply, "because it is."

This establishes the veracity of the Classical motive. The referential presence of "God" in Atalanta is justified by Swinburne's avowed intent to reanimate the Hellenic theological perspective. Although this discussion does not attempt to trace the Classical antecedents which

had authentically or subjectively inspired the defiant nature of Atalanta's theology,⁹ the principal critical conclusions should be examined; for their purport reveals the instigative presence of another motive by which to explicate the play's theology.

A motive extrinsic to the Classical is unanimously recognized as having spurred Atalanta's theological defiance: most critics have labelled it "antitheism." Here is the foremost contemporary verdict on Atalanta's theology pronounced by Lord Houghton in 1865:

That the problem of Evil, the mystery of sorrow, the contradictions of life, weighed heavily on the old Greek mind, and constituted much of the pathos of their legends and their literature, is undeniable, but we shall look in vain for any precedent for the naked defiance of the supreme, the bitter and angry anti-theism, which is here presented as the ruling passion.¹⁰

Tennyson's question to Swinburne about Atalanta-- "Is it fair for a Greek chorus to abuse the Deity something in the style of the Hebrew prophets?"¹¹--signals the critical perception of Atalanta's biblical

⁹ In addition to Wier's and Rutland's studies, the following works may be consulted for their analyses of the Classicism of Atalanta in Calydon: Paul de Reul submits a lucid, perspicacious evaluation in his L'Oeuvre de Swinburne (Bruxelles: Sand, 1922); and Douglas Bush treats the subject in a chapter devoted to "Swinburne" in his Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry (1937; rpt. New York: Norton, 1963), pp. 328-357. It should be noted that although Wier's efforts are undoubtedly the most far-reaching, his analysis is confined to the comparison of Atalanta (and Erechtheus) with the tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides, and does not furnish a synthesized evaluation of the play's Classicism.

¹⁰ "Atalanta in Calydon: A Tragedy," The Edinburgh Review, CXXII (July 1865), pp. 213-14.

¹¹ Cited by C.K. Hyder, p. 112.

character. Paul de Reul notes that "Les phrases bibliques envahissent jusqu'aux chœurs d'Atalanta" (p.84), and recognizes "le style de Job" in the choral lamentations (p. 149). P. Dottin finds "le chœur d'Atalanta in Calydon . . . plus swinburnien que grec (car il se pose en contempteur des dieux)."¹² And Douglas Bush claims that:

Whatever slight parallels can be found in Greek tragedy, especially in Euripides, the total effect is quite un-Greek. Swinburne wrests the idea of fate out of all likeness to a philosophical conception of the laws which never grow old, an eternal order which breaks the unruly or unfortunate individual. In the drama as a whole . . . he makes Greek idiom and allusion the vehicle for a perversion of Greek sentiment. (p. 340)

William Rutland more specifically points out the "imperious desire" to kill God, implicitly uttered in Atalanta as anachronistic: "There is nothing akin to this in Greek poetry; it is an utterly unhellenic philosophy" (p. 142).

Although denunciations of the indifference, arbitrariness, impenetrability of the gods are often interweaved, in Classical drama, with pious declarations, they do not--as in Atalanta--constitute the fabric of the play. And whatever defiant or despairing utterances may, in fact, be summoned from Greek tragedy to warrant the legitimacy of Atalanta's denunciations, none is pronounced by the traditionally mild-mannered and conciliatory Chorus. This is Paul de Reul's main objection to Atalanta's Classicism:

¹² "Swinburne et les Dieux," Revue Anglo-Américaine, II (1924-25), p. 420.

Son tort [Swinburne's] est d'avoir outré des sentiments que les anciens expriment sans appuyer, comme un secret trop douloureux, et d'attribuer ces sentiments au choeur, qui est généralement, chez les Grecs, l'organe de la tradition, du respect religieux devant la destinée. (p. 167)

Although Swinburne, as Lang relates, was "the last man in the world to admit to an error, even when faced with irrefutable factual proof,"¹³ he was eventually "spurred" to reason. In his review of Atalanta, Lord Houghton's suggestion of a Byronic influence on the play incited Swinburne to correct the critic, thereby admitting his Sadian source:

I only regret that in justly attacking my Antitheism you have wilfully misrepresented its source. I should have bowed to the judicial sentence if instead of 'Byron with a difference' you had said 'de Sade with a difference.' The poet, thinker, and man of the world from whom the theology of my poem is derived was a greater than Byron. He indeed, fatalist or not, saw to the bottom of gods and men.¹⁴

Swinburne's confirmation is, in effect, superfluous; Atalanta is saturated with evidence of Sade's impressive impact on the poet. With or without Swinburne's approval, critics would have undoubtedly maintained, with Douglas Bush, that "in Atalanta, Swinburne put the metaphysic of Sade into superficially antique dress" (p. 350).

The thematic infiltration in Atalanta of Sade's "metaphysic" may certainly be invoked to substantiate the motive which has generally been

¹³ In his Introduction to Letters, I, xxxviii.

¹⁴ Letters, I, 125; dated "[Friday July 14?, 1865]", therefore, approximately three months after Swinburne's vehement refutation of such an interpretation allegedly submitted by "outraged virtue."

acknowledged as adulterating the play's Classicism; that is, Swinburne's antitheism. Yet, this term's possible connotation of theism might equivocate not only Sade's dramatic assertions that he was, in fact, indicting "une chimère," but also the analogous claim made on Swinburne's behalf.

Paul de Reul submits that "le dieu qu'on invective dans Atalanta est celui du Prométhée de Shelley, le tyran que l'homme s'est donné, plutôt que le Zeus d'Eschyle" (p. 149n). Lafourcade concurs: "A vrai dire, les vers d'Atalanta feraient plutôt penser au Prométhée Déchainé, de Shelley," but finds that Swinburne had turned to William Blake for "l'indignation passionnée" which his own "Urizen," as Lafourcade suggestively dubs Swinburne's "God," inspires. And yet Blake's verses could not have sparked "le délire anarchique du grand Choeur IV" (II, 401): this, Lafourcade maintains, Swinburne had found in Sade.

Swinburne's personal antitheism and atheism had surreptitiously vied with Classical tenets, thereby producing the unhellenic blasphemies of the Chorus and its anachronistic desire to commit deicide, as well as the Judeo-Christian features of Atalanta; moreover, Sade, Blake and Shelley, having competed with Aeschylus and Euripides, had prevailed.

Atalanta's "God" may have sprung from Swinburne's fundamental Classical motive; but the features and the fate of "the supreme evil" are analogous to those of Sade's "chimère," Blake's "Urizen," and Shelley's "Jupiter." That is, the "supreme evil, God" dramatically embodies the traditional conception of a God who is, in reality, nothing but a construct; and, consequently, "His" fate is determined by--more

than Swinburne's Classical or antitheistic impulses--his atheistic iconoclastic motive.

And lest Swinburne's iconoclastic instrument be considered insufficiently effective or appropriate: it should be remembered that inasmuch as his attack is directed at the intellect, he is equipped with the most suitable and subtlest of weapons:

Speech too bears fruit, being worthy; and
 air blows down
 Things poisonous, and high-seated violences,
 And with charmed words and songs have men
 put out
 Wild evil, and the fire of tyrannies.¹⁵

¹⁵ Atalanta in Calydon, IV, 263. All further references to the play are to page alone.

CHAPTER 2

The Iconoclastic Motive

The Classical motive is then fundamentally, but not exclusively, responsible for the divine presence in Atalanta. Had Swinburne prevented his personal convictions from adulterating his attempt to revive Classical theology, no competing motive could be signalled. However, Atalanta's unorthodox digressions from the Classical perspective, as well as the Judeo-Christian orientation of these digressions, confirm that another motive had prompted Swinburne's poetical contrivance of a God.

As Swinburne worked on Atalanta, his intellect was being perturbed by two prominent "heretics": "il est plongé . . . dans les ouvrages de William Blake et du Marquis de Sade; le problème théologique pèse sur lui et l'obsède."¹

Although Swinburne freely alluded to the Marquis and even composed "a highly imaginative versified portrait of Sade"²--"Charenton"--dated "Dimanche 27 octobre 1861," in which the latter is described as:

L'homme suprême, élan de la nature altiére
Qui prend Dieu par l'oreille et l'appelle compère,
Regarde l'infini, le nargue et lui dit Tu.³

¹ La Jeunesse, II, 389.

² Cecil Y. Lang, Letters, I, 46n.

³ "Charenton" is reprinted by Lang in New Writings by Swinburne . . . (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1964), pp.8-9.

his estimation of Sade had no substantial basis, for Swinburne had not yet read the Marquis' works. His sole source of knowledge of Sade was Monckton-Milnes' informed discussion, and the latter appears to have "resisted Swinburne's importunities" to borrow his copy of La Nouvelle Justine ou les Malheurs de la vertu "for nearly a year before capitulating, in August 1862."⁴

Swinburne's immediate reaction to the novel--one of utter disappointment--is lengthily and vehemently expatiated in a letter to his mentor. He is unequivocal as to the "effect" produced on him and in his caustic critique of the Marquis:

'Is this the mighty Satyr? is this all?' . . .
Weep with me over a shattered idol! . . .
assuming every postulate imaginable, I lament
to say it appears to me a most outrageous
fiasco. (Letters, I, 54)

In a fictitious address to Sade, later in the letter, Swinburne's protest translates the disillusionment of what had indubitably been a subjective vision:

Tenez, my friend, Arch-Professor of the
Ithyphallic Science as you are, will you
hear the truth once for all? You take
yourself for a great pagan philosopher--you
are a Christian ascetic bent on earning the
salvation of the soul through the mortification
of the flesh. You are one of the family of
St. Simeon Stylites. You are a hermit of the
Thebaid turned inside out. You, a Roman of
the latter empire? Nero knows nothing of you . . .
Paganism washes its hand of you. (p. 57)

⁴ Cecil Y. Lang, Introd., Letters, I, xlvi.

By paganism, Swinburne meant both aversion to Christianity and adherence to the Classical mentality. If the Marquis unfailingly respects the first clause of Swinburne's definition, he nevertheless professes no sympathy for paganism, which he derides as he does all other religions, underscoring its initiative role in theological history. Although the poet had so imagined him, Sade never purported to be a pagan. Offended by this estrangement from his own position, Swinburne thus denigrated his "idol."

Yet, if the literal sense of Swinburne's assertion that Justine "has done decidedly little damage to my brain or nerves" (Letters, I, 57) may be trusted, the parting of the ways suggested in the letter will certainly not be effected. Three months after his sardonic complaint against the Marquis, Swinburne assists Milnes in deciphering "a priceless autograph letter of the Marquis de Sade" of which "The handwriting I flatter myself with thinking not unlike that of this note."⁵ The poet's correspondence, from December 27 on, abounds with allusions to "ce cher et digne marquis"; Milnes is consistently addressed as "Mon cher Rodin"; Swinburne frequently switches to French to articulate improvised Sadian scenes in Sadian 'jargon' and wit; and facetiously impersonates and animates Sadian characters.⁶

⁵ Letters, I, 63. Letter dated "Nov. 25, 1862]"

⁶ See, for instance, the letter to Milnes dated "12 février /1863]" in which Swinburne poses as "Zulma de Cardoville," one of Sade's heroines who appears in the concluding chapter of Justine. Several other Sadian personae are mentioned in the letter (Letters, I, 79-83).

The Marquis' powerful impact, albeit à retardement, is perceptible in Swinburne's near obsessive references to "Ce bon M. de Sade . . . cet homme sublime" (Letters, I, 66). Swinburne, now avowedly "grown over-wise through perusal of Justine and Juliette,"⁷ not only delights in epistolary emulations of the Marquis' sado-eroticism and humor, but exhibits the more serious aspect of Sade's influence.

In this refutation of Ruskin's assessment of his poems, which the latter had read in manuscript, Swinburne explicitly acknowledges Sade's philosophical objective:

R. actually intimates that 'genius ought to devote itself' to the help of humanity and 'to overthrowing its idols,' in a word to justify the ways of Urizen to the sons of Enitharmon. Quelle horreur! Yet again I abstained from replying that when a man of genius did devote himself to the benefit of humanity and the upsetting of its idols (notamment 'cette chimère méprisable qu'on appelle la Vertu, et cette chimère exécration qu'on appelle Dieu') . . . humanity rewards their supreme benefactor with a madhouse or a gaol.⁸

If Sade had in effect been rewarded by both the "madhouse" and the "gaol," Swinburne's own boon will prove to be immensely more pleasant: Atalanta in Calydon, his own iconoclastic effort, will win the poet an indisputable laurel.

⁷ Letters, I, 78; dated "ca. February 10, 1863.".

⁸ Letter to W.M. Rossetti dated "August 8 / 1863 /", I, 86. This passage also displays Swinburne's first affirmative association of Blake and Sade; a rapprochement which will be elaborated in his William Blake.

Swinburne had come to understand Sade and would never again broach the theme of inverted theology to deride the writer who "saw to the bottom of gods and men."⁹ The radical "reconversion" to Sade cannot be substantially justified. It may be that having requested Milnes' opinion of his initial reaction--"I should like to know . . . whether you agree or not" (Letters, I, 57)--Swinburne had been gratified with a response elucidating the Marquis' philosophical objective. Or perhaps Swinburne's initial disappointment--mostly generated from the let-down of his biased expectations--simply waned and was superseded by further and calmer reflection. Swinburne's recantation is, however, indisputably manifest in his acknowledgement of Sade as "The poet, thinker, and man of the world from whom the theology of my poem [Atalanta in Calydon] is derived" (Letters, I, 125).

Concurrent to his epistolary (and certainly other) meditations on Sade, was a serious preoccupation with the works of William Blake. Having been solicited by the Rossettis for an account of the Prophetic Books to be included in their revision of Alexander Gilchrist's Life of Blake, Swinburne--convinced that "the best thing for the book . . . is to leave it alone"--refused; yet consequently set upon "the making of a distinct small commentary of a running kind, but as full and satisfactory as could well be made on Blake's work."¹⁰

⁹ Letter to Lord Houghton [Monckton-Milnes] dated "Friday [July 14?, 1865 7]", Letters I, 125.

¹⁰ Letter dated "[October 6, 1862 7]", Letters I, 60.

By "December 15 /1863_7," Swinburne had reviewed, for his own use, "half the Life /Gilchrist's_7 . . . also some notes on the 'Gates of Paradise'" and resolved that "the matter (half-handled and half-shirked as it is by Gilchrist) will seem so hopelessly and provokingly obscure that something must be done, if (as I hope and wish) every corner of Blake's work is to be more or less reclaimed from chaos and reduced to a cosmic state for the persevering student who desires to escape from the bondage of Bowlahoola" (Letters, I, 90). Swinburne thus engaged himself in a five-year effort of which the fruit would be his well-known William Blake.

Swinburne's attention was never unilaterally focused; he seemed best motivated when working on several things simultaneously. The next letter, dated "December 31 /1863_7," reveals that while reflecting on Blake and Sade, he had been deeply involved in yet other business: "I have done some more of my Atalanta which will be among my great doings if it keeps up with its own last scenes throughout" (Letters, I, 93).

Swinburne's immersion in Blake and Sade was then bound to produce creative and intellectual repercussions on his synchronous composition of Atalanta. Moreover, in preparation for his own Classical project, the poet had reviewed Shelley's Prometheus Unbound (as well as Arnold's Merope)¹¹ and could hardly have neglected to note the conceptual affinity of its "Jupiter" with Blake's "Urizen" and Sade's "chimère."

¹¹ Swinburne mentions this in a letter to Lady Trevelyan, Letters I, 115.

Sade, Blake and Shelley all dramatized a divine construct. They reified in their works the traditional concept of a God which they deemed had been engendered by narrow and impressionable minds. Hence, although these writers may be dramatically addressing "God," their tirades are, in fact, pointed toward the intellects that fabricate and revere the ens rationis.

Their literary depictions of "God" consist in displaying the very characteristics which theists, avowedly or unavowedly, attribute to the divine and carrying these putative features to their logical, acrimonious extremes. This is done in an effort to suggest or demonstrate the absurdity of believing in an imagined omnipotence who would impose unnecessary self-abnegation and constraining burdens. These writers' dramatical figurations of "God" should certainly not warrant the assumption that they believed in the existence of their own contrivances; they were exclusively "Giving a body to Falshood that it may be cast out forever" (Jerusalem, p.153).

Swinburne was, in Atalanta, to emulate the iconoclastic spirit of these three men, but would most avidly follow the Sadian letter. Shelley's iconoclastic manner was certainly an eminent precedent, for he fashions a "Jupiter" who--while qualified as the "Oppressor of mankind,"¹²--resides in:

¹² In Shelley's Preface to Prometheus Unbound / 1820 /; rpt. in Shelley's Prometheus Unbound: A Variorum Edition, ed. Lawrence John Zillman (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1960), p. 120. All further references to Shelley's Prometheus Unbound, hereafter cited as PU, are to this edition and appear in the text.

Dreams and the light imaginings of men,
 And all that faith creates or love desires,
 Terrible, strange, sublime and beauteous shapes . . .
 . . . all the gods
 Are there, and all the powers of the nameless worlds,
 Vast, sceptred phantoms; heroes, men and beasts;
 And Demogorgon, a tremendous gloom;
 And he, the supreme Tyrant, on his throne of burning
 gold. (PU, pp. 143-44)

"In Shelley's allegory," submits Carl Grabo, "it is the mind of man which creates and which destroys Jupiter;" hence God is but a dramatized construct: "the creations of the mind itself are personified; philosophic abstractions are projected, externalized, and become actors in a drama."¹³ Shelley's Jupiter is but "a frail and empty phantom"; a "Phantasm" (PU, p.145).

Swinburne's greater conformity to the Classical mentality ~~did not~~ allow him to be as explicit as Shelley. In order to suggest, for he cannot articulate, the cogency of the iconoclastic proposition which Grabo perceives in Prometheus Unbound--"Humanity . . . creates the evil which it suffers and ultimately destroys that evil personified by the Jupiter of its creation" (p.15)--Swinburne delineates the malefic and tribulative impositions which theists are logically bound to recognize as emanating from their so called omnipotent God; so that the rejection of this "supreme evil, God" becomes the only viable, if not reasonable, solution.

¹³ Prometheus Unbound : An Interpretation (1935; rpt. New York: Gordian, 1968), pp. 12, 159.

Albeit Swinburne does not broach the notion of God's merely conceptual existence in Atalanta, the play's theological discourse is unequivocally geared toward the implicit assertion of this idea.

Although some of Shelley's theological harangues will inspire Swinburne, the crucial episode of Prometheus Unbound is deemed by the latter not forceful enough: "the Deliverance is washed out and washed away in a mere flood of 'gentle words'" (Letters, II, 94); and can therefore not vie with the clangorous impact of Sade's invectives.

Blake's own ominous "Falshood" is incarnate in "Urizen": "an abstract non entity . . . [a] cloudy . . . God . . . Now seen, now obscur'd; King of sorrow" (The Book of Ahania, p. 83); the mistaken Demon of heaven" (Visions of the Daughters of Albion, p. 47). In The First Book of Urizen the poet thus describes the appearance of this "deathful shadow" (p. 79):

Lo, a shadow of horror is risen -
In Eternity! Unknown, unprolific!
Self-closed, all-repelling: What Demon
Hath form'd this abominable-void
This soul-shudd'ring vacuum?--Some said
"It is Urizen", But unknown, abstracted
Brooding secret, the dark power hid. (p. 69)

If Blake is an outspoken iconoclast, he is also fundamentally a theist, albeit enlightened. Whatever zealous efforts were exerted by Swinburne to rally Blake under the Sadian banner,¹⁴ the English poet's

¹⁴ Especially in William Blake. David G. Riede's assessment is cogent: "Swinburne's reading of Blake presents us with a mutated version of the original. Blake has undergone a metamorphosis, has fallen asleep and awakened as Swinburnian Blake . . . Swinburne was a fervent admirer of Blake and saw him--sometimes correctly and sometimes not--as a champion of the causes he himself believed in" (p. 39)

convictions remained inexorably implanted in theistic ground. "His faith was absolute and hard like a pure fanatic's,"¹⁵ admits Swinburne; and this must have tempered his discipleship, restricting a potentially impressive influence.

Sade's incomparable impact on Swinburne is easily justified. If Blake's theism and Shelley's "gentle" manner attenuated these poets' impact on Swinburne, the Marquis' boldly articulate atheism was certain to generate a powerful attraction. Moreover, Sade held a supplementary lure which would infallibly seduce a predisposed Swinburne--sadism. Blake and Shelley had high enough cards but the Marquis, so to speak, held a full-house.

Sade was unequivocal as to his perception of the divine:

. . . cet être exécration, né de la crainte des uns, de la fourberie des autres, et de l'ignorance de tous . . . une platitude révoltante qui ne mérite de nous ni un instant de foi, ni un moment de respect; une extravagance pitoyable qui répugne à l'esprit, qui révolte le cœur et qui n'est sortie des ténèbres que pour le tourment et l'humiliation des hommes. Exécutez cette chimère; elle est épouvantable; elle ne peut exister que dans l'étroite cervelle des imbéciles ou des frénétiques: il n'en est point de plus dangereuse au monde, aucune qui doive être à la fois plus redoutée . . . plus abhorrée des humains. (*Justine*, VI, 152)

¹⁵ Hugh J. Luke, ed., *William Blake: A Critical Essay* by Algernon Charles Swinburne (London: Hotten, 1868; rpt. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1970), p. 5; hereafter cited as WB.

Albeit Swinburne's objective is to evoke this brand of reasoning, he cannot be so overtly heretical in his Classical context. He therefore resorts to the only theistic perspective dramatized by Sade, through the fictional Saint Fond whose God, "le centre du mal," is indubitably the immediate precursor of Swinburne's "supremè evil":

. . . je me dis: il existe un Dieu; une main quelconque a nécessairement créé tout ce que je vois, mais elle ne l'a créé que pour le mal, elle ne se plaît que dans le mal, le mal est son essence . . . que lui importe que je souffre de ce mal, pourvu qu'il lui soit nécessaire? . . . le mal . . . est absolument utile à l'organisation vicieuse de ce triste univers. Le Dieu qui l'a formé est un être vindicatif, très barbare, très méchant, très injuste, très cruel, et cela, parce que la vengeance, la barbarie, la méchanceté, l'iniquité, la scélératesse, sont des modes nécessaires aux ressorts de ce vaste ouvrage . . . C'est dans le mal qu'il a créé le monde; c'est par le mal qu'il le soutient, c'est par le mal qu'il le perpétue . . . le mal qui nuit toujours, le mal qui est l'essence de Dieu, ne saurait être susceptible d'amour ni de reconnaissance . . . ce Dieu, centre du mal et de la férocité, tourmente et fait tourmenter l'homme par la nature et par d'autres hommes pendant tout le temps de son existence. (Juliette, VIII, 383-4)

Bound by his Classical models to the adoption of a theistic perspective, Swinburne must have found Sade's handling of such a perspective to be the most compatible with his purpose. Although Shelley's "ghost of Jupiter" similarly springs "From all-prolific Evil" (PU, p.144) and Blake's "Selfish father of men" is "Cruel jealous selfish fear" ("Earth's Answer", p. 18), Swinburne does not focus on the problem of divine evil from the vantage of these two poets. Blake and Shelley depict evil as the human trait primarily responsible for the creation of the divine construct and hence the evil imputed to their "Gods" is exclusively a projection of the evil inherent in mythopoeic minds.

Although Sade and Swinburne are firmly convinced of the cogency of the proposition that the concept of God, if it originated in fear and ignorance, was perpetuated by evil minds,¹⁶ they approach the problem of evil, from their theistic perspectives, in a more philosophical light. As putative theists, they acknowledge the existence of God while simultaneously exposing the evil which permeates the world. Thus the perennial antitheistic rationale is reiterated: if both God and evil exist, God must be responsible for all evil and is, in fact, "the supreme evil," "le centre du mal."

Swinburne was, however, equally impressed by the histrionics of yet another Sadian character: Alman, a perverse chemist who decries 'nature' as the supreme devastator. Although nature, in Atalanta, does flaunt Almanian colours, the poet more significantly and elaborately borrows the imagery and purport of the chemist's ideology to dramatize "God." Having found in Saint Fond's harangue the essential feature of Atalanta's divine personality--evil--Swinburne secures from Alman's depiction of nature, the foremost divine activity--the wielding of death. Swinburne moreover retains the paradoxical quality which Alman describes as motivating the destructive impulse. Observe nature as apprehended by the Sadian chemist, noting particularly its viciously oxymoronic vein:

¹⁶ Both writers delineate this proposition outside of their theistic perspectives: for Sade's exposition of this view, see above, p. 36; Swinburne expounds this theme in "Before a Crucifix" (II, 81-87) and "Birthday Ode" (III, 341-58).

Suivez-la [la nature] dans toutes ses opérations: vous ne la trouverez jamais que vorace, destructive et méchante, jamais qu'inconséquente, contrariante et dévastatrice . . . A quoi servait-il de nous créer pour nous rendre aussi malheureux? . . . Ne dirait-on pas que son art meurtrier n'ait voulu former que des victimes . . . que le mal ne soit son unique élément, et que ce ne soit que pour couvrir la terre de sang, de larmes et de deuil qu'elle soit douée de la faculté créatrice? . . . vous ne la verrez jamais créer que pour détruire, n'arriver à ses fins que par des meurtres, et ne s'engraisser comme le Minotaure, que du malheur et de la destruction des hommes . . . Lui voyez-vous jamais dispenser un don sans qu'une peine grave l'accompagne? Si elle vous éclaire douze heures, c'est pour vous plonger douze autres dans les ténèbres; vous laisse-t-elle jouir des douceurs de l'été, ce n'est qu'en les accompagnant des horreurs de la foudre . . . Voyez avec quel art méchant elle entremêle vos jours d'un peu de plaisir et de beaucoup de peines; examinez . . . les maladies dont elle vous accable, les divisions qu'elle fait naître parmi vous, les suites effroyables dont elle veut que vos plus douces passions soient entremêlées; près de l'amour est la fureur; près du courage, la férocité; près de l'ambition, le meurtre; près de la sensibilité, les larmes; près de la sagesse, toutes les maladies de la continence . . . Sa main barbare ne sait donc que pétrir le mal? le mal la divertit donc? (Justine, VII, 46-47)

The terrific impact which this tirade exerted on Swinburne is partly evidenced by the poet's unidentified, but unmistakable, reference to it as he attempts, in a footnote in his William Blake, to correlate Blake's 'conception of "the organ of destruction and division" with that of a "modern pagan philosopher of more material tendencies."¹⁷ Yet the most eloquent and meaningful attestation of Swinburne's appreciation of the

¹⁷ Although Swinburne's "fragment of a paraphrase or 'excursus'" would best be defined as a freely translated résumé of Sade's dispersed invectives against nature in both Justine and Juliette, its primary source is incontestably Almani's speech. Swinburne, in concocting his English version, had significantly not neglected the oxymoronic terms of Almani's depiction. Swinburne's 'excursus' is contained in the Appendix.

Almanian diatribe resides within Atalanta where "the supreme evil, God," prompted by the pernicious whims of his paradoxical mentality, wreaks havoc and destruction on His own creations.

The leitmotif of Almani's harangue--paradox: paradox as it emanates from an evil impulse and culminates in the insidious infliction of death--is analogously that which informs all divine action in Atalanta. As the Calydonian gods¹⁸ "with their healing herbs infect our blood," and may "give us poisonous drinks for wine," "and gall for milk, and cursing for a prayer" (p. 252); thus does the issue of the drama reside in the "curse" that Artemis "hath sent . . . To hurt us where she healed us" (p. 254).

The oxymoronic activities of Almani's nature are not exclusively confined to the ultimate annihilation of its creations. Albeit steadfastly directed toward this objective, it moreover afflicts the span of human existence with a pernicious give-and-take, through the infestation of all positives by their destructive counterparts. Hence, if pleasure is secured, it is only with the vicious intent to adulterate or abort it through the imposition of pain. Similarly, Atalanta's gods:

¹⁸ Following the Classical norm, Swinburne varies between the plural and the singular in his references to divinity. He thereby respects the theological pluralism of the Hellenes and, while his address to "the supreme evil, God" invokes the rightful supremacy of Zeus, it also legitimately reflects Judeo-Christian monotheism.

Put moans into the bridal measure
 And on the bridal wooll's a stain;
 And circled pain about with pleasure,
 And girdled pleasure about with pain;
 And strewed one marriage-bed with tears
 and fire
 For extreme loathing and supreme desire. (p.285)

Blake's familiar verses in Songs of Experience--"binding with briars, my joys and desires" ("The Garden of Love", p.26) and "blights with plagues the Marriage hearse" ("London", p.27)--may have partly inspired the above passage, but its fundamental affinity is with Sade. Beyond their similarity both in imagery and purport with Almani's tirade, Swinburne's verses transmit the more comprehensive Sadian theme of the intermingling of pain and pleasure. The sado-erotic discourse is thus patently operative here to denote the gods' sadism.¹⁹

It may rightly be claimed that the poet was in no need of Sade's illustrious example to depict the contiguity of pain and pleasure. Swinburne's own predilection had asserted itself long before he read Sade whose influence--it may be added--he was predisposed to, not "corrupted"

¹⁹ Albeit Swinburne's alleged masochism may invite a favorable interpretation of the gods' sadism, such an interpretation, which would perceive "divine" sadism as an enjoyable phenomenon, cannot be contextually substantiated. The intricacies of this argument cannot be entertained here; it must suffice to say that although their own inclinations indubitably inspired Sade and Swinburne to introduce a sadistic vein in their theological discourses, and albeit they very likely took pleasure in this contrivance; both writers were certainly perspicacious enough to realize that their readers would perceive 'sadism' as negative and hence "God" as negative. Their intent was obviously to derogate--not enhance divinity; to expressly deride and confute the traditional conception of a benevolent and immaculate deity; and to evoke mistrust in "God" thus paving the way for the integral refutation of "God," ultimately atheism.

by. Yet for the dramatic application of "sadism" to divinity, Swinburne was unmistakably indebted to the Marquis.²⁰

Sadism and destructiveness are therefore divine characteristics and they are conveyed through an unilateral thematic medium: paradox. The gods are bent upon destroying what they have engendered; whether it be human life or that which constitutes it. The feature which underlies all divine characteristics or actions is contradictoriness:

The lord of love and loathing and of strife
Who gives a star and takes a sun away;
Who shapes the soul, and makes her a barren wife
To the earthly body and grievous growth of clay;
Who turns the large limbs to a little flame
And binds the great sea with a little sand;
Who makes desire and slays desire with shame. (p.287)

As Lafourcade submits, this passage reflects Blake's crusade against "la contradiction entre l'infini du désir et les limitations des sens."²¹ Blake often berates the individual, claiming that "man has closed himself up" (The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, p.39), thus bringing this contradictory state upon himself; but Swinburne propitiously adopts the other Blakean perspective; that which dramatizes the "Selfish father of men" as responsible for "this heavy chain, / That does freeze my bones

²⁰ This statement is supported by the chronology of Poems and Ballads, First Series: the poems which impute sadism to divinity make their appearance (either through Swinburne's recitation of them to friends or through publication) from December 1862 on. Swinburne read Sade in mid-August of that year.

²¹ La Jeunesse, II, 400. See especially the conclusion of The Book of Thel from which the following verses are particularly pertinent: "Why a tender curb upon the youthful, burning boy? / Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?" (p.6).

around" and bounds "free love with bondage" ("Earth's Answer", p.18-19);

"the jealous God who divided nature against herself" (WB, p.118).

Swinburne's verses are thus a variant of the theme upon which Blake's Mary Magdalene admonishes divine contradictoriness in The Everlasting

Gospel:

Thou Angel of the Presence Divine,
That didst create this body of mine;
Wherefore hast thou writ these laws
And created hell's dark jaws? . . .
That they may call a shame and sin
Love's temple that God dwelleth in,
And hide in secret hidden shrine
The naked human form divine,
And render that a lawless thing
On which the soul expands her wing. (pp.513-14)

By portraying a God "Who makes desire and slays desire with shame," Swinburne is both fuelling his dramatic representation of a contradictory and absurd deity, while implicitly exposing and assailing the contradictory tenets of theism. Much as Sade indicts a God who--were he really to exist--would be the most ignominious of beings to perpetrate such contradictions or, alternately, "/ces / imbéciles de chrétiens," for catering to such inconsistency:

Qui d'ailleurs a créé l'homme? Qui lui a donné
les passions que doivent punir en lui les
tourments de l'enfer? N'est-ce pas votre Dieu?
Ainsi donc, imbéciles de chrétiens, vous admettez
que d'une part ce Dieu ridicule prête à l'homme
des penchants qu'il se trouve obligé de punir
d'un autre côté? . . . Dieu . . . (à supposer
son existence, ce que je ne fais comme vous le
voyez, qu'avec dégoût) serait . . . le plus
injuste et le plus barbare des êtres; s'il
nous punissait de devenir malgré nous, victimes
des travers dans lesquels sa main inconséquente
nous plonge avec plaisir. (Juliette, VIII, 360,364)

In "Anactoria"--a poem which meticulously parallels both the theological delineations and objectives of Atalanta--Swinburne has Sappho also broach the theme of divine contradictoriness with regard to passion. The interrogatory and rhetorical form used by Sade early in the aforementioned passage is analogously employed by Swinburne:

. . . who hath cursed
 Spirit and flesh with longing? filled with
 thirst
 Their lips who cried unto him? who bade
 exceed
 The fervid will, fall short the feeble deed,
 Bade sink the spirit and the flesh aspire,
 Pain animate the dust of dead desire . . .? (I, 62)

God's deviousness takes on even greater proportions in Atalanta, not only does He belabour the quest toward gratification by antagonizing spirit and flesh, by castigating the very thought of desire which He has created, He paradoxically prescribes longing while insidiously and thoroughly eliminating the possibility of its fulfillment: "Saying, 'Joy is not, but love of joy shall be' (p.288). The delusion and perfidy are integral.²²

God's oxymoronic activity is relentless :

Thou hast kissed us, and has smitten . . .
 Thou hast sent us sleep, and stricken sleep
 with dreams . . .
 Thou hast made sweet springs for all the
 pleasant streams,
 In the end thou hast made them bitter with
 the sea.

²² Shelley had briefly and more generally tackled this idea in Prometheus Unbound : "And in their desert hearts fierce wants he sent, / And mad disquietudes, and shadows / of unreal good" (p. 211).

Thou has fed one rose with dust of many men;
 Thou hast marred one face with fire of many
 tears,
 Thou hast taken love, and given us sorrow again. (p.288)

Swinburne thus tactically reiterates Sade's arraignment of the Judeo-Christian conception of divinity underscoring its greatest flaw as contradictoriness: "votre Dieu . . . en perpétuelle contradiction avec lui-même, distribue de la même main et le bien et le mal" (Juliette, IX, 82).

Saint Fond's God displays the utmost indifference to human pain and anguish. Atalanta's gods are similarly "Not knowing in any wise compassion / Nor holding pity of any worth" (p. 285) just as Blake's Urizen in Jerusalem is "not a Being of Pity & Compassion"; and the "Spectre"'s lament:

Prayer is vain I called for compassion:
 compassion mockd [,]
 Mercy & pity threw the grave stone over me &
 with lead
 And iron, bound it over me for ever. (p. 152)

is comparable to Althaea's cognizance of divine imperviousness to propitiation:

They mock us with a little piteousness,
 And we say prayers, and weep; but at the last,
 Sparing awhile, they smite and spare no whit. (p.253)

Sappho is also aware of the futility in appealing to God: "For who shall change with prayers or thanksgivings / The mystery of the cruelty of things?" (Anactoria, I, 62). And in "Félice," Swinburne elaborates

the theme of divine apathy and derides all tentatives to petition
heaven:

For none shall move the most high gods,
Who are most sad being cruel; none
Shall break or take away the rods
Wherewith they scourge us, not as one
That smites a son

Are the skies wet because we weep,
Or fair because of any mirth?
Cry out; they are gods; perchance they sleep;
Cry out; thou shalt know what prayers are worth,
Thou dust and earth

O laughing lips and lips that mourn,
Pray, till ye feel the exceeding weight
Of God's intolerable scorn,
Not to be borne.

Behold there is no grief like this;
The barren blossom of thy prayer,
Thou shalt find out how sweet it is.
O fools and blind, what seek ye there,
High up in the air? (I, 194-5)

If prayers and tears prove useless to humanity, they are nevertheless
of great service to the gods who are virtually nurtured by human sorrow.

The Chorus asks:

What shall be done with all these tears of ours? . . .
O our masters, shall they be
Food for the famine of the grievous sea,
A great well-head of lamentation
Satiating the sad gods? (p. 285)

This passage calls to mind Baudelaire's verses in "Le Reniement
de Saint-Pierre," a poem which Swinburne could not have failed to note
in his first reading of Les Fleurs du mal:

Les sanglots des martyrs et des suppliciés
 Sont une symphonie enivrante sans doute,
 Puisque, malgré le sang que leur volupté coûte,
 Les cieux ne s'en sont point encore rassasiés.²³

Blake's Urizen also "feeds on Sacrifice & Offering : / Delighting in cries & tears" (Jerusalem, p. 152); and in "The Tyger," "the stars" analogously "water'd heaven with their tears" (p. 25).

In "Anactoria," Sappho's arraignment of a "God above all gods and years" who "with offering and blood sacrifice of tears, / With lamentation . . . sorrow . . . and weeping . . . Feeds the mute melancholy lust of heaven" (I, 62) is again reminiscent of Blake's descriptions of "Heavens over Hells / Brooding in holy hypocritical lust, drinking the cries of pain / From howling victims of Law" (Jerusalem, pp. 182-83). Yet it is probably Blake's "Mad Song" that must have inspired Swinburne to depict, in Atalanta, a heaven structured on human pain. Compare Swinburne:

Seeing all your iron heaven is gilt as gold
 But all we smite thereat in vain;
 Smite the gates barred with groanings manifold,
 But all the floors are paven with our pain. (pp. 285-86)

and Blake:

²³ Marcel A. Ruff, ed., Baudelaire: Oeuvres complètes, (Paris: Seuil, 1968), p. 119. Swinburne first read the 1861 expurgated version of Les Fleurs du Mal in which this poem appeared; Rossetti was to give him a copy of the 1857 unexpurgated edition in 1864.

Lo! to the vault
 Of paved heaven
 With sorrow fraught
 My notes are driven;
 They strike the ear of night
 Make weep the eyes of day.²⁴

If human tears are nutriment and sustenance for the gods, so, it seems, is human flesh. Sappho perceives the anthropophagous character of God: "Is not his incense bitterness, his meat / Murder" ("Anactoria, I, 62) and Atalanta's Chorus is also familiar with "the gods who divide and devour" (p. 328). But Althaea is most cognizant of this divine disposition: oppressed by the shame of her "inexpiable impotence" in the face of her brothers' death, Althaea appeals to heaven: "What," she asks rhetorically, shall "heal me? What bring back . . . light to the face? . . . What restore me? . . ."

What strange thing eaten or drunken,
 O great gods,
 Make me as you or as the beasts that feed,
 Stay and divide and cherish their own hearts?
 For these ye show us; and we less than these
 Have not wherewith to live as all these things
 Which all their lives fare after their own kind
 As who doth well rejoicing. (p. 308)

If the gods are elsewhere heedless of human entreaty, they are uncommonly responsive to Althaea's perverse request; for she soon exhibits the restorative trait that she had solicited; she has promptly been invested with the filicidal and anthropophagous character of God and nature:

²⁴ In Poetical Sketches, p.407. Compare also Blake's pregnant pun in "The Chimney Sweeper": ". . . God & his priest & King / Who make up a heaven of our misery" (Songs of Experience, p. 23).

You strong gods,
 Give place unto me; I am as any of you,
 To give life and to take life. Thou, old
 earth,
 That hast made man and unmade; thou whose
 mouth
 Looks red from the eaten fruits of thine own
 womb;
 Behold me with what lips upon what food
 I feed and fill my body; even with flesh
 Made of my body. (p. 314).

Althaea thus derives vampiric sustenance and vitality from the slaughter
 of her own son:

. . . . I reel
 As one made drunk with living; whence he draws
 Drunken delight; yet I, though mad for joy,
 Loathe my long living and am waxen red
 As with the shadow of shed blood; behold,
 I am kindled with the flames that fade in him,
 I am swollen with subsiding of his veins,
 I am flooded with his ebbing; my lit eyes
 Flame with the falling fire that leaves his lids
 Bloodless; my cheek is luminous with blood
 Because his face is ashen. (p. 317)

In the same way that Almani, declaiming "je l'imiterai . . . je
 la copierai" (*Justine* VII, 47) had resolved to follow the norm set by
 nature, which is: "créer que pour détruire, n'arriver à ses fins que par
 des meurtres, et ne s'engraisser, comme le Minotaure, que du malheur et
 de la destruction des hommes," so Althaea in insistently referring to her
 act as emulative of God and nature indicates it as characteristic of
 these perennial exemplars. Swinburne is also tactically positioning
 Althaea--from this point in the play to that in which she assumes silence--
 as a mirror-image of the gods and nature. Had she not, after all,
 committed the supreme paradox: "Lo, the fire I lit, / I burn with fire
 to quench it"? (p. 314).

Through its attribution of sadism, vampirism or anthropophagy and filicide to God, nature and Althaea, the play enacts, as it were, the fundamental and paradoxical law acknowledged by Almani--"créer que pour détruire." Atalanta thus illustrates this law as, primarily, the perverse raison d'être of a God who--as Sappho indignantly cries out-- "hath made all things to break them one by one" ("Anactoria," p. 52).

In the same way that the divine bestowal of all positives is purposefully effected toward an insidious negation--the gods "hurt" where they "heal"; they sadistically procure pleasure so as to suffuse it with pain, hence aborting it; they contradictorily encourage and chastize impulses--they create life with the sole purpose of destroying it. In Swinburne's "paraphrase" of Sade, at least one clause is perfectly applicable to the Calydonian gods: their "desire is continually, toward evil, that" they "may see the end of things which" they "hath made" (WB, 158n).

Hence, along with the contiguity of healing and hurting; of pain and pleasure; of desire and the castigation of desire, is the contiguity of life and death. Meleager thus discerns these oxymoronic forces in Althaea:

Thou too, the bitter mother and mother-plague
Of this my weary body--thou too, queen,
The source and end, the sower and the scythe,
The rain that ripens and the drought that slays,
The sand that swallows and the spring that feeds,
To make me and unmake me. (p. 350)

Soon after, Meleager exonerates Athaea for he understands her act as part of an inexorable "law":

. . . this death was mixed with all my life,
 Mine end with my beginning: and this law,
 This only, slays me, and not my mother at all. (p.331)

Swinburne has elaborately illustrated this mixture, as it were, of life and death. That the creator should also be the destroyer is in itself reflective of this law. Inasmuch as the gods and nature are sustained by human death and Althaea revitalized by her filicide, life thrives on death. A choral metaphor thus establishes the referential scheme whereby "thy name [God's] is life and our name death" (p.389). Swinburne reverses the conventional image of death devouring life, not only in an effort to avoid the rehandling of a hackneyed image, but to suggest expressly a reversal of meaning. Life itself has become death in Atalanta. Beyond the anthropophagous connotations of this reversal, a more existential verity emerges: the gods have virtually enshrouded existence through their infestation of all life with death. Their inexorable law decrees that all death be mixed with life, the end with the beginning. They have rendered life and death covalent and coexistent.

This law is embodied by Althaea--she is, according to her son, both "the source and end"-- and analogously symbolized by the "brand." Meleager's death sprang simultaneously with his life and although Althaea has been able to subdue her son's "death" by snatching the brand from the fire, she had only succeeded in postponing it; rendering it latent until that time when she would allow it to reclaim its potency and crush its vital counterpart. All positives thus contain and are eventually overwhelmed by their own negations. Observe Althaea as her life-giving faculty is overcome by its destructive antonym:

Oh! Oh! For all my life turns round on me,
 I am severed from myself, my name is gone,
 My name that was a healing, it is changed,
 My name is a consuming, (p. 317)

Death is inherent in all life. Perhaps this idea of the coequality and coexistence of life and death had again been inspired by Sade's view of the oxymoronic nature of existence: "Le principe de la vie, dans tous les êtres, n'est autre que celui de la mort; nous les recevons et les nourrissons dans nous tous deux à la fois" (Juliette IX, 174). And Swinburne introduces this concept in Atalanta as a machination of the gods who, in concocting their poisonous admixture of life and death which they mete out to humanity, assuredly do not sample it:

But up in heaven the high gods one by one
 Lay hands upon the draught that quickeneth,
 Fulfilled with all tears shed and all things done,
 And stir with soft imperishable breath
 The bubbling bitterness of life and death,
 And hold it to our lips and laugh; but they
 Preserve their lips from tasting night or day,
 Lest they too change and sleep, the fates that
 spun,
 The lips that made us and the hands that slay;
 Lest all these change, and heaven bow down to
 none,
 Change and be subject to the secular sway
 And terrene revolution of the sun.
 Therefore they thrust it from them, putting
 time away. (p. 286)

Swinburne will, however, through a veritable poetic tour de force, subject the gods to their own insidious law. Emulating the divine infestation of death in life, Swinburne analogously invests symbols of life and God with their negations, rendering them connotative of death. Thus does God's "name" which is "life" become--in accordance with the

divine decree--death. God is therefore not exempted from the universal law which he has so perniciously inflicted upon humanity: His life is also mixed with His death.

The "word" and "breath" which secure their vital and divine connotations from an eminent source will incur, in Atalanta, a dramatic perversion. Swinburne propitiously exploits the Classical ominousness ascribed to words and the equally characteristic anathematization on "overspeech" (p. 289) or hubristic speech to legitimize his otherwise anachronistic perversion of the biblical Word. Although the sequence of the following extracts does not correspond to that of the play, it is likely that Swinburne's intent will be best perceived if this discussion proceeds from the Classical castigation of speech or words toward the more symbolic passage wherein Swinburne assails the biblical Word, in all its connotations. Hence, if the word-death association in the following verses appears void of all but the Classical foreboding of words, it is nevertheless meant to establish a thematic atmosphere in which the iconoclastic passage can be legitimately couched. Here is how the poet's apparently innocuous and dramatically justified infusion of death in a symbol of life and God turns out to be the most shattering iconoclastic blow dealt by Atalanta.

Some verses almost seem to be extracts from the great tragedies themselves, such as: "Words divide and rend; / But silence is most noble till the end" (p. 289); and:

. . . refrain
 . . . reinless mouths, and keep
 Silence, lest by much foam of violent words
 And proper poison of your lips ye die. (p. 284)²⁵

In words as in life, death is latent. Althaea is conscious of this intrinsically portentous quality in words and her fear of the messenger's "ambiguous mouth" is confirmed by his "double word bring [ing] forth a double death" (p. 300).

As the Chorus blames the gods for Meleager's death--"O gods, what word has flown out at thy mouth?--Althaea assumes all guilt: "I did this and I say this and I die;" whereupon the Chorus replies: "Death stands upon the doorway of thy lips, / And in thy mouth has death set up his house" (p. 316). From then on, the Chorus perceives Althaea in the same way it apprehends the gods and rightly so; for Althaea has merely

25

Theseus' advice to Hercules in Euripides' Madness of Hercules: "Refrain lips, lest high words bring deeper woes!" (II, 231) and the Chorus in Bacchanals: "Of the reinless lips that will own no master, / Of the folly o'er laws pale stubborn to stray-- / One is the end of them, even disaster" (III, 33) and in Helen, Menelaus cries: "thy words are death" (I, 533) Aeschylus' insistent warning against the disastrous repercussions of the infatuate Word is particularly stressed in his Prometheus Bound as Oceanus admonishes and counsels Prometheus: "if thou hurlest forth words so harsh and of such whetted edge, peradventure Zeus may hear thee . . . so that thy present multitude of sorrows shall seem but childish sport . . . such plight as thine, Prometheus, is but the wages of too vaunting speech . . . do thou hold thy peace and be not too blustering of speech . . . chastizement is inflicted on a froward tongue" (Herbert Weir Smyth, trans., Aeschylus / 1922; rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1956 / I, 243, 245; English translation in prose on alternate pages). All further references to Aeschylus' plays are to this edition and appear in the text in the following form: volume number; page number.

arrogated²⁶ the destructive aspect of divinity:

You strong gods,
Give place unto me; I am as any of you;
To give life and to take life. (p. 314)

Having virtually assumed divinity, Althaea not only takes life as the gods do; her murderous act is modelled on the divine method of destruction: as God "Smites without sword, and scourges without rod" (p. 287), so Meleager, "Without sword, without sword is he stricken; / Slain and slain without hand" (p. 319)

Althaea's "breath," thematically equivalent to the word, in fact to the divine word--recall the Chorus' impulsive inculcation of the gods; "O gods, what word has flown out at thy mouth"--is her instrument of death:

She set her hand to the wood,
She took the fire in her hand;
As one who is nigh to death,
She panted with strange breath;
She opened her lips unto blood,
She breathed and kindled the brand . . .

26

Having earlier appropriated the creative, in both engendering Meleager and saving him from spontaneous death, presumptuously uttering: "having all my will of heaven" (p. 257), "I go hence / Full of mine own soul, perfect of myself, / Toward mine and me sufficient" (p. 258). The "creative" aspect, should not, however, be interpreted in too favorable a light: creation is but the necessary prerequisite to destruction, as evidenced by Althaea's antithetic act.

But as the wind which is drouth,
 And as the air which is death,
 As storm that severeth ships,
 Her breath severing her lips,
 The breath came forth of her mouth
 And the fire came forth of her breath. (pp.318, 319)

The interchangeability, as it were, between Althaea and the gods ceases as the realization that her destructiveness has overpowered her spurs Althaea to silence: "My lips shall not unfasten till I die" (p.318).²⁷ Whereas the gods remain unsubduable and impenitent, for "Who," laments the dying Meleager, "shall bridle their lips?" (p. 329).

This ominousness in "words" and "breath" permeates the play and thus allows Swinburne to launch his iconoclastic blow from the legitimate terrain of Classical Weltanschauung:

Who hath given man speech? or who hath set therein
 A thorn for peril and a snare for sin?
 For in the word his life is and his breath,
 And in the word his death,
 That madness and the infatuate heart may breed
 From the word's womb the deed
 And life bring one thing forth ere all pass by,
 Even one thing which is ours yet cannot die--
 Death. (p. 284)

²⁷ Perhaps reflecting the Aeschylean prescription of silence. In Agamemnon, the chorus sagaciously utters: "Long since have I found silence an antidote to harm" (II, 49).

From the Classical apprehension of hubris, which most explicitly informs these verses, Swinburne vents his venom. The passage cited constitutes a brilliant example of Swinburnian polysemy: within the articulate Classical discourse--which will, itself, prove fatal to the gods--is ensconced Swinburne's necessarily implicit attack on Judeo-Christian theology.

The Classical import of the "speech metaphor" should be examined first. As the third line is reached, however, the ambiguity as to the referential antecedent of the pronoun "his" entails the internal ramification of the discourse. The pronoun's possible alternate substitution of "man" or "Who" (the author of speech) generates antithetical readings. If "man" is considered the antecedent, the passage is thus interpretable: the author of speech--evidently God--has infested it with a thorn and a snare to prick and entrap the mad and hubristic ("infatuate") individual unto death. Hence the word which connotes both life and breath is equally generative of death if pronounced against "The bitter jealousy of God" (p. 313).²⁸ The Chorus thus denounces the divine perfidy whereby God has himself set the thorn and the snare which expediate man to his doom. The offspring of the "word's womb" and that which "life . . . bring/_s_/ . . . forth" is then death. God has rendered the word and breath--this is again brilliantly illustrated in the passage relating Althaea's filicide--productive of death.

²⁸ This is dramatically actualized as the hubristic attitude of both Meleager and Althaea leads one to death and the other to a semblance of death.

This contradictory and malicious act is by now not beyond expectation: it is consistent with the divine habit of contaminating all life with death. It is startling, however, to find that this time, God's perniciousness backfires. For in the alternate reading, that in which "his" refers to the author of speech, the hubristic word proves fatal to God: "For in the word his life is and his breath, / And in the word his death." Through hubris, which may be defined along Swinburnian terms as the defiant assertion of "the holy spirit of man" (p. 259), the individual can actually dethrone and annihilate God, much as Shelley's Prometheus had done.²⁹

There is only one passage in Atalanta which speaks approvingly of speech and significantly enough, it upholds rebellious speech:

Speech too bears fruit, being worthy; and air
 blows down
 Things poisonous, and high-seated violences,
 And with charmed words and songs have men put out
 Wild evil, and the fire of tyrannies. (p. 263)

Swinburne's own "charmed words," his poetry, his Atalanta, are precisely orchestrated to eradicate "Wild evil" and, unlike Althaea's or Meleager's, the poet's hubristic words will not suscite divine retaliation, albeit they portend the death of God.

²⁹ If Swinburne merely suggests the theme of "The holy spirit of man" in Atalanta, he will vehemently enunciate it from Songs before Sunrise on and delineate it to its logical atheistic resolution. It should be noted, however, that Swinburne's formulation of this theme as such, originates in Atalanta.

'Having intended to prick and ensnare the individual, God had thus provided the instrument--hubristic "word" and "deed"--for His own destruction. Even within the more explicit Classical discourse of Alalanta, God is not totally unassailable. Swinburne exploits the Classical tenet of the supremacy of Fate over the gods to suggest divine vulnerability and subservience to a greater power.³⁰ In Atalanta, "those grey women with bound hair / the three fates / . . . fright the gods" (p. 257) and the Chorus admits that "Fate / is stronger / than all the gods" (p. 311); Fate is "the daughter of doom, the mother of death, / The sister of sorrow; a lifelong weight / That no man's finger lighteneth, / Nor any god can lighten fate" (p. 312). In "Anactoria," Sappho is confident that "fate / will / undo the bondage of the gods" (I, 66) and in "Hymn to Proserpine," Swinburne attains a more ominous specificity: "For there is no God found stronger than death" (I, 73). The gods are not, as it were, death-proof; they cannot regulate their own fate. Both the possibility and the eventuality of their demise are then validated by Atalanta's Classical discourse.

This discourse subtly but portentously engages another in the speech metaphor. The Judeo-Christian equation of the Word and breath with life is here perverted³¹ to include a paradoxical corollary--death. Swinburne had not failed to acknowledge, within Atalanta, the biblical connotation

30

This tenet is evoked in Euripides' Iphigenia in Taurica as Athena submits that "for Gods, is Fate too strong" (II, 49); and in Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound as Prometheus readily acquiesces to the sovereignty of Fate: Zeus "cannot escape what is foredoomed" (I, 251).

31

Not inverted, for the basic life-giving connotation needs be retained if it is to undergo destruction.

of divine breath as vitally creative: early in the play, the Chorus relates: "They [the gods] breathed upon his mouth, / They filled his body with life" (p. 259);³² but having once propitiously established the implicit presence of biblical symbolism within his Classical discourse, Swinburne undeviatingly sets upon its systematic perversion.

Hence, if in the Old Testament, the Word of God and His breath create;³³ in Atalanta, they are lethal. Furthermore, the Johannine gospel, as it reiterates the Genetic import of Logos, articulates its symbolic representation of God Himself: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1); and moreover crowns the Word with a new designation; it now signifies "Christ": "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (1:14). And in Revelation, "his name is called The Word of God" (19:13). To these documented connotations of the Word must be added the accepted significance of the Word as gospel.

The speech metaphor therefore subjects all the biblical connotations of Logos--God, Christ, life and gospel--to a devastating reinterpretation. Again, the equivocality of the pronoun "his" is self-serving. The first

³² Note that the only thematic variant with the biblical narration is the substitution of "mouth" for "nostril"--a significant modification which fuels the importance attributed to "speech" in Atalanta.

³³ God's "word" creates: "And God said, Let there be light and there was light" (Gen 1:3); "For he spake, and it was done" (Ps. 33:9); and God's "breath" creates: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Gen 2:7).

reading conveys the fatal potency which the "word" as gospel comprises for humanity. The faithful enactment of Christian dogma--the breeding of the deed from the word's womb--makes "life bring one thing forth . . . Death."³⁴ And the Word is also Christ, the deathly carrier of the divine gospel. The "Hymn to Proserpine" vividly delineates the enshrouding "breath" which emanates from a moribund Christ:

Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world
has grown grey from thy breath;
We have drunken of things Lethean, and fed on the
fullness of death . . .
O lips that the live blood faints in, the leavings
of racks and rods!
O ghastly glories of saints, dead limbs of gibbeted
Gods! (I, 69)

And in "Before a Crucifix," the "word" is unabashedly assailed as
"the grey-grown speechless Christ" is summoned to account for it:

Is there a gospel in the red
Old witness of thy wide-mouthed wounds?
From thy blind stricken tongueless head
What desolate evangel sounds
A hopeless note of hope deferred?
What word, if there be any word? (II, 84)

Evidently, Christ being but a "carrion crucified," (p. 87) does not respond: "This dead God here against my face / Hath help for no man" (p. 86).

³⁴ The specifically Christian implications of the word's destructiveness are more clearly delineated in other poems. Beyond the gospel's promulgation of an ascetic or deathly life, eloquently illustrated in "Hymn to Proserpine," Swinburne denounces the ecclesiastic manipulation of gospel in a later poem, "Before a Crucifix." The speaker addresses Christ:
Look on thine household here and see
These that have not forsaken thee.

If in "Before a Crucifix," Christ's "forehead [is] bitten though with thorns," these do not harm him but are rather the mark of "sanguine sweat and tears, / The stripes of eighteen hundred years" (p. 85). In "The Armada," an even later poem in Poems and Ballads, Third Series, Swinburne has not rescinded his inversion of word and breath connotations as "Plague and death from his [God's] baneful breath take life and lighten" (III, 193); and as he addresses "the Lord of darkness, the God whose love is a flaming fire, / The master whose mercy fulfils wide hell till its torturers tire":

Thy breath shall darken the morning, and wither
the mounting sun;
And the daysprings, frozen and fettered, shall know
thee, and cease to run;
The heart of the world shall feel thee, and live,
and thy will be done. (III, 194)

Hence the "word" and "breath" of God and Christ are lethal.³⁵

Thy faith is fire upon their lips, . . .
They scourge us with thy words for whips,
They brand us with thy words for brands. (II, 82)

Pricks and snares have merely been altered to whips and brands.

33 Although Shelley professes a definite sympathy for Christ, the man, in Prometheus Unbound, his cognizance and deploation of the effects of Christian gospel parallel Swinburne's: the Chorus submits that "His words outlived him, like swift poison / Withering up truth peace, and pity" (p. 164).

Alternately, however, the author of speech, the creator of Logos, succumbs to his death through his own "word." In this sense, the death of God is made to ensue from his imposition of Christian gospel, with its thorns and perils, its snares and sins, on humanity. Swinburne here reiterates the Sadian prophecy that God's demise will spring from Christian dogma: "C'est par la religion que se détruit le Dieu qu'annonce la religion" (Juliette, VIII, 48). This is to say that the existential tribulations promoted by the dictates of Christian gospel will prove so totally unbearable as to spur the necessary annihilation of God. This is the rationale which informs Swinburne's "Hymn of Man" wherein the judgment of God is effectuated. Divine crimes against humanity are enunciated to substantiate the case against God which culminates in the pronouncement of an irrevocable verdict:

Make now for thyself expiation, and be thine atonement
for thee.
Ah, thou that darkenest heaven--ah, thou that bringest
a sword--
By the crimes of thine hands unforgiven . . .
By the savours of gibbets and stakes thou hast planted
to bear thee fruit;
By torture and terror and treason, that make to thee
weapons and wings;
By thy power upon men for a season, made out of the
malice of things; . . .
By the face of the spirit confounded before thee and
humbled in dust.
By the dread wherewith life was astounded and shaped
out of sense of its trust,
By the scourges of doubt and repentance that fell on
the soul at thy nod,
Thou art judged, O judge, and the sentence is gone
forth against thee, O God . . .
O thou the Lord God of our tyrants, they call thee,
their God, by thy name.
By thy name that in hell-fire was written, and burned
at the point of thy sword,
Thou art smitten, thou art smitten; thy death
is upon thee, O Lord. (II, 99, 100, 104).

The deathly implications of Christian dogma should rationally point toward the rejection of God. This constitutes the gist of Sade's argument:

Ce dogme affreux porte . . . à l'athéisme, à l'impiété: tous les gens raisonnables trouvant bien plus simple de ne point croire en Dieu, que d'en admettre un assez cruel, assez inconséquent, assez barbare pour n'avoir créé les hommes qu'à dessein de les plonger éternellement dans le malheur. (Juliette, VIII, 369)

Sade's phrase, "de ne point croire en Dieu," implies either "l'athéisme" or "l'impiété."³⁶ If in "Hymn of Man," Swinburne explicitly exhorts to atheism inasmuch as he proclaims that God is but a construct; in Atalanta, a parallel case against God culminates in a more Classical "impiety" which is nevertheless conducive to the adoption of atheism. This is Atalanta's judgement of God which, it must be recalled, is prompted by the insufferable tribulations instigated by "the supreme evil, God":

Therefore because thou art strong, our father, and we
Feeble; and thou art against us, and thine hand
Constrains us in the shallows of the sea
And breaks us at the limits of the land;
Because thou hast bent thy lightnings as a bow,
And loosed the hours like arrows; and let fall
Sins and wild words and many a winged woe
And wars among us, and one end of all; . . .
Because thou art over all who are over us;
Because thy name is life and our name death;
Because thou art cruel and men are piteous,
And our hands labour and thine hand scattereth;

³⁶ In The Destiny of Man, Nicolas Berdyaev strikes a contemporary note in accordance with Sade's rationale: "It is precisely the traditional theology that leads good men, inspired by moral motives, to atheism" (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955; rpt. New York: Harper, 1960), p. 24.

Lo, with hearts rent and knees made tremulous,
 Lo, with ephemeral lips and casual breath,
 At least we witness of thee ere we die
 That these things are not otherwise, but thus;
 That each man in his heart ~~sigheth~~, and saith,
 That all men even as I,
 All we are against thee, against thee, O God most high. (p.288-89)

This constitutes the logical refutation of an evil, contradictory and malicious God whose "wild words" pour forth intolerable existential burdens. Hence the "word" of God--whether his infestation of it with a "thorn" and a "snare" afflicts the Classical individual, or (implicitly) torments the Christian--boomerangs back to its utterer to depose Him and, according to the speech metaphor, to pronounce His impending and, as it were, self-imposed, death: "For in the word his life is and his breath, / And in the word his death."

The untenability of Christian tenets will then, as Sade contends, itself provoke "the death of God." It is through His word or because of it that God will die: His word being, on all counts, inviable. God's rapine of humanity is thus displayed in Atalanta, as in "Hymn of Man," to construe the case against God. Blake's warning that "he who makes his law a curse, / By his own law shall surely die" (Jerusalem, p. 172) has been avidly authenticated by Swinburne. God's own law in Atalanta --the curse which decrees that death be inherent in and coexistent with all life--imprecates God Himself; as the speech metaphor asseverates the incorporation of death in the divine word. God is therefore as subject to his own curse as are all phenomena.

The death of God is evidently not dramatized in Atalanta, but the fate of a God who can boast of no votaries is easily surmised. In any

case, the choral wish to see mortality inflicted upon the gods--a wish visibly inspired not only by revenge but also presumably by a hankering for freedom from divine bondage--may be considered as implicitly fulfilled by the speech metaphor. After all, had not Althaea acknowledged the power of words to "put out / Wild evil, and the fire of tyrannies"?

I would the wine of time, made sharp and sweet
 With multitudinous days and nights and tears
 And many mixing savours of strange years,
 Were no more trodden of them under feet.
 Cast out and spilt about their holy places:
 That life were given them as a fruit to eat
 And death to drink as water; that the light
 Might ebb, drawn backward from their eyes, and the night
 Hide for one hour the imperishable faces,
 That they might rise up sad in heaven, and know
 Sorrow and sleep, one paler than young snow,
 One cold as blight of dew and ruinous rain;
 Rise up and rest and suffer a little, and be
 Awhile as all things born with us and we,
 And grieve as men, and like slain men be slain. (pp.286-87)

In "Anactoria," Sappho less timorously articulates her wish to commit deicide:

Him would I reach, him smite, him desecrate,
 Pierce the cold lips of God with human breath,
 And mix his immortality with death. (I, 63)

This is precisely what was achieved by Swinburne in the speech metaphor: God's "immortality" was, in effect, mixed with death. The choral wish to mortalize God is thus materialized by the pronouncement of the divine curse against divinity itself.

All that remains to be done is to await, like Prometheus, "the retributive hour" (PU, p.156) toward which the latter's curse on Jove imminently points:

Foul Tyrant both of Gods and Human-kind, . . .
 . . . thou, who art the God and Lord; O, thou,
 Who fillest with thy soul this world of woe,
 To whom all things of Earth and Heaven do bow
 In fear and worship: all prevailing foe!
 I curse thee! let a sufferer's curse
 Clasp thee, his torturer, like remorse;
 'Till thine Infinity shall be
 A robe of envenomed agony;
 And thine omnipotence a crown of pain,
 To cling like burning gold round thy dissolving brain (pp.147-48)

and which is, to Atalanta's inspired Chorus, certainly forthcoming:

Behold, when thy face is made bare, he that
 loved thee shall hate;
 Thy face shall be no more fair at the fall of
 thy fate.
 For thy life shall fall as a leaf and be shed
 as the rain;
 And the veil of thine head shall be grief; and
 the crown shall be pain. (p. 313)

There is then a sense in which the "sufferer's curse" may "clasp"
 God so as to divest Him of all omnipotence; a sense in which the potency
 of curses, of "charmed words and songs" can "put out / Wild evil, and
 the fire of tyrannies;" in which the "Word" of man is devastatingly fatal
 to God. In "The Last Oracle," one of the Poems and Ballads, Second
Series, Swinburne declares that it is "the speech of man whence Gods were
 fashioned" (III, 10); that not "Till the word was clothed with speech by
 lips of man" were gods "made" (p. 7); and conversely, that in human
 speech do "Divers births of godheads find one death appointed" (p. 8).
 Therefore, as the word engendered the life and breath of God, it will
 also utter His death. The merely conceptual existence of God is hence
 subtly suggested by the speech metaphor: God's existence is but a

product of human speech and thus totally dependent upon its import; so that the human word is both the source and end of God: "In the word his life, is and his breath, / And in the word his death."

In Atalanta and Poems and Ballads, First Series, Swinburne self-restrained to theistic perspectives--for tactical and literary reasons--has to utter his atheistic convictions beneath the veil of antitheism. The most intense and sacrilegious of his tirades can thus not be interpreted as overtly atheistic for the very acts of castigation, blasphemy, defiance and refutation presuppose an object to be reviled or spurned. Thus does the "Hymn to Proserpine," even as it articulately prophecies the death of God, necessarily admit His existence:

You are Gods, and behold, ye shall die, and the
waves be upon you at last.
In the darkness of time, in the deeps of the
years, in the changes of things,
Ye shall sleep as a slain man sleeps, and the
world shall forget you for kings. . . .
Yet thy kingdom shall pass, Galilean,
thy dead shall go down to thee dead. (I, 71)

And thus do Swinburne's convictions appear to be antitheistic rather than atheistic. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that Swinburne--through an admirably contrived polysemous rhetoric--was, in fact, venting his atheism.

Although Swinburne consistently adopts a theistic perspective--for, as has been explained, it allowed him to delineate the untenability of theism--he does, in some of his later poems, lift the dramatic curtain, as it were, to expose the chimera that is God. In "Hertha," for instance, he declaims the death of a construct:

For his twilight is come on him,
 His anguish is here;
 And his spirits gaze dumb on him,
 Grown grey from his fear;
 And his hour taketh hold on him stricken,
 the last of his infinite year.

Thought made him and breaks him. (II, 79)

For God is but "the shade cast by the soul of man" ("Genesis", II, 17)
 and in "Hymn of Man," Swinburne decries the human fabrication of this
 concept:

Yea, himself /_man_/_ too hath made himself
 chains, and his own hands plucked out his eyes,
 For his own soul only constrains him, his own
 mouth only denies.
 The herds of kings and their hosts and the
 flocks of high priests bow
 To a master whose face is a ghost's. (II, p. 98)

The slave, however, grows increasingly conscious of this self-
 imposed bondage--"He hath stirred him/_self_/_ , and hath found out the
 flaw in his fetters, and cast them behind"--and the suggestion of the
 speech metaphor that the death of "God" will come as his birth, is here
 explicitly formulated: "Yea, man thy slave shall unmake thee, who made
 thee lord over man" (II, 100).

A unilateral iconoclastic rationale consistently informs all of
 Swinburne's "theological" poetry. He seldom deviates from the tactical
 procedure adumbrated in Atalanta, unless it be toward greater elaboration
 or greater explicitness. Swinburne's rationale is not original; but
 whatever sources may have transmitted it to the poet, the Marquis was
 indubitably and most immediately one of them:

Je crois . . . que s'il y avait un Dieu, il y aurait moins de mal sur la terre. Je crois que si ce mal y existe, ou ces désordres sont ordonnés par ce Dieu, et alors voilà un être barbare, ou il est hors d'état de les empêcher, et, de ce moment, voilà un Dieu faible, et, dans tous les cas, un être abominable, un être dont je dois braver la foudre et mépriser les lois. Ah! Justine, l'athéisme ne vaut-il pas mieux que l'une ou l'autre de ces extrémités? et n'est-il pas cent fois plus raisonnable de ne point croire de /sic/ Dieu, que d'en adopter un aussi dangereux . . . aussi contraire au bon sens et à la raison? "(Justine, VI, 341)

Outwardly, Atalanta-- attentive to its Classical and iconoclastic responsibilities--carries an antitheistic message. The "supreme evil, God" is verbally battered, cursed and rejected for having trampled on humanity and filled it "to the lips with fiery death" (p. 287). Yet the blasphemous choral refutation of God constitutes the culmination of Atalanta's Sadian rationale, advocating not merely antitheism but atheism. Swinburne has delineated the logical progression of a responsible theistic mind which, once it becomes cognizant of the tribulations inherent in existence, necessarily inculcates God. The step which should follow the choral rejection of God is intimated by reason itself: "n'est-il pas cent fois plus raisonnable de ne point croire en Dieu, que d'en adopter un aussi dangereux . . . aussi contraire à la raison?"

Like Sade, Swinburne addresses his iconoclastic verses to theists. The practicality of this perspective is self-evident; atheists need not be convinced of God's non-existence. Hence, in their attempts to exhort

theists to atheism, both writers dramatically position themselves as theists, or rather antitheists, and assume the theistic discourse.³⁷

Thus does Swinburne in Atalanta belabour his characters with the burden of belief in order to have them refute it; and thus is he "Giving a body to Falshood that it may be cast out forever."

The Classical motive was shown to provide a solid justification for Swinburne's contrivance of a God in Atalanta. In this chapter, the necessity of God's referential presence for the cogent delineation of the iconoclastic motive has also been established. The theological argument of Atalanta unravels in much the same way as a scientific investigation would be conducted. The hypothesis--God's existence--must be posited if a probe into the divine participation in human affairs is to be effected. This task is primarily assigned to the Chorus which, if it is not permitted to negate the initial hypothesis overtly, comes to deny its positive value, thereby arriving at the only viable conclusion, which is the refutation of God.

It has been shown that this is but the explicit function of the iconoclastic motive. Swinburne is not only intent on denigrating the theistic perspective; his corollary objective is to propound atheism.

37

Although Saint Fond is Sade's only theistic persona; all other Sadian characters temporarily presuppose the existence of God for the sake of presenting their atheistic arguments.

And thus, the iconoclastic discourse is construed to suggest that "God" is but a disposable fabrication of the intellect: human "speech" has conceptualized and will, so to speak, deconceptualize "God."³⁸

The polysemous nature of the iconoclastic argument thus generates two discourses: overtly, the antitheistic discourse, and covertly, the atheistic discourse. The first is unequivocal: it adopts the theistic perspective and logically maintains it to incriminate God as the source of all existential tribulations. The atheistic discourse which considers God as a construct seems, however, short of consistency--for, if the tribulations depicted in Atalanta are authentic, who or what is their actual source? It may be agreed that theistic dogma and the belief in God are in some degree responsible for the prohibition of pleasure, the propagation of suffering and self-abnegation, and perhaps, for some, death; but neither dogma nor construct can be the authentic generators of existential paradoxes, human contingency and ephemerality.

The problem is raised when it is made clear--as will be done in the next chapter--that Atalanta's dramatic laments are existentially inspired and thus authentic. They cannot be exclusively relegated to the

³⁸ Kenneth Burke's proposition, in The Rhetoric of Religion (Boston: Beacon, 1961), pp. 13-14, that "what we say about words, in the empirical realm will bear a notable likeness to what is said about God; in theology" is certainly applicable to Swinburne's treatment of the "word" in Atalanta.

dramatic realm; but must be considered at par with Swinburne's personal voice; that which intimates, in Atalanta, the mere conceptuality of God. If then, Atalanta offers no explication for these existential tribulations other than that articulated by the antitheistic discourse, it may be assumed, and this would prove fatal to the atheistic discourse, that Swinburne is actually--albeit impulsively and temporarily--suggesting that God is responsible for all existential tribulations.

Atalanta is however not so ill-equipped as to lack an intrinsic porte de sortie. The antitheistic formulation of God as the source of existential tribulations is couched in the rhetoric of atheistic Existentialism. The paradoxical and arbitrary activities of Atalanta's God--albeit their assertion as such propitiously serves to fuel the antitheistic motive--are really dramatic representations of the conditions of existence itself.

Chapter 3

The Atheistic Existential Motive

To claim of a nineteenth-century literary work, not only that it was existentially inspired, but that it moreover carries an Existential message, poses a problem of anachronism. This issue, therefore, should be considered prior to the investigation of Swinburne's "Existentialism."

Although Existentialism was established as a philosophical school in post-war Europe, its precursors have been sought in pre-twentieth-century literary and philosophical fields. No cogent study of Existentialism leaves unmentioned the perennial character of this philosophy, which Walter Kaufmann qualifies as "a timeless sensibility."¹ Its articulation has been traced back to Greek tragedy and the Bible; and to such works as Plato's Apology and Augustine's Confessions.

Inasmuch as Existentialism is a human rather than academic type of philosophy, its expression is not circumscribed by temporal or geographical limits. To Ralph A. Ciancio, "The Existentialist, curiously enough, is a philosopher without a philosophy. That is, Existentialism is more a philosophical attitude, a special way of

¹ Introd., Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre (Toronto: New American Library, 1975), p. 12.

thinking, than a systematic body of thought."²

It is this "philosophical attitude" or "special way of thinking" that is here posited of Swinburne. He was evidently not an adept of Existentialism propounding the tenets of his philosophy--neither was Nietzsche or Dostoevsky. Rather, the modern-day comprehension of this "way of thinking" sheds light on the Existential nature of Swinburne's dramatized Weltanschauung, as it did on that of the German and the Russian writer.

That light is not aimed at Swinburne's work in an effort to invest it with added importance: it is no superfluous, garish glow but rather a highlighting transparency through which an inherent and essential philosophy can be discerned; and without which Atalanta in Calydon as well as Swinburne's subsequent work (Songs before Sunrise); and the thematic transition between both, are bound to retain that perplexity over which so much ink has been poured.³

Why should the term "Existentialism" be summoned at all to describe what may be claimed as simply echoing the existential

² "Faulkner's Existentialist Affinities," Studies in Faulkner, Carnegie Series in English, No. 6 (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Institute of Technology, 1961), p. 69. This translates a general, if not unanimous, consideration of Existentialism.

³ It should be recalled that although Atalanta in Calydon was published in 1865 and thus prior to Poems and Ballads, 1866, most of the poems in the latter volume were composed before Atalanta. Therefore, in persistently invoking the perplexing transition between Poems and Ballads and Songs before Sunrise, critics have blurred their own vision; they have neglected to consider the chronological and thematic stepping-stone between the two volumes--Atalanta in Calydon. The next chapter will submit an interpretation of the evolution from Poems and Ballads to Songs before Sunrise, via Atalanta; whereby the allegedly abrupt gap dividing Swinburne's first two volumes of poetry may be filled and rendered intelligible by the Existential Atalanta.

utterances commonly discerned in Greek tragedy? Certainly, Swinburne's Chorus partly reflects the Classical articulation of human impotence, victimization, contingency and ephemerality as well as the perennial recognition of the supremacy of death. These "Existential" themes are present in Greek tragedy; and the poet, in striving for imitative excellence, may have simply reiterated them in his own Classical play. And yet, beyond the important fact that Swinburne's Existentialism is essentially not literarily inspired, but results from a "lived experience," Atalanta's philosophy transcends that of Classical drama in several ways.

Swinburne, unlike Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides, does not authentically address his existential complaints to God, but utilizes the dramatic figure of deity to represent existential tribulations. Moreover, Swinburne's Chorus does not display a sagacious awareness subdued by sufferance or piety; unlike its Classical precursors, it does not merely complain and resign: it revolts. And finally, Atalanta does not timidly broach one or two Existential themes, it considers them all. Atalanta's existential consciousness translates a total Weltanschauung, an all-comprehensive, integrated apprehension of life. With the assistance of "modern" Existentialists, it will be seen that this apprehension anticipates the tenets of atheistic Existentialism rather than echoes the wisdom of the Classics.

But first, perhaps the rationale which has induced the conclusion that Swinburne was venting, over a century ago, the philosophy of atheist Existentialists, should be briefly delineated. The intensity of the choral lamentations as well as their authenticity--the personal

element is substantiated by a synchronous, pertinent event in the poet's life--demanded that the veritable source of existential tribulations be recognized; for, in light of Swinburne's atheism, "the supreme evil, God" could not be realistically inculpated. This entailed a closer scrutiny of the characteristics dramatically ascribed to Atalanta's God (and gods and Fate) as well as of the import of the choral lamentations; and the final analysis yields simply to a recapitulation of the themes upon which the theological discourse revolves, the themes which constituted the previous chapter: paradox, absurdity, alienation, suffering, contingency, ephemerality, arbitrariness, impotence and finitude. This is the rhetoric of Existentialism. Yet if this rhetoric is present in the Classical and the iconoclastic discourses, why invoke a third discourse?

Albeit the Classical and iconoclastic voices of Atalanta pronounce the existential discourse, they do not relate, as such, Swinburne's atheistic Existential discourse. At the conclusion of the preceding chapter, it was suggested that Swinburne used his existential awareness to fuel both the Classical and iconoclastic discourses: he dramatically burdened "God"--whether it be the Classical or the hypothetical divinity--with his existential load. This, of course, complied with the theistic perspective and activated it towards its intended antitheistic conclusion. But Swinburne the atheist was well aware that no divine malignance was responsible for human suffering, contingency and finitude; he was also cognizant that although the belief in God, or theism, may be held largely responsible for the bleakness of existence, it cannot be accused of engendering all human suffering; he knew that paradox, ephemerality, contingency,

finitude were but the conditions of existence.

In order to distinguish the atheistic Existential discourse from the existential lamentations of the Classical and iconoclastic discourses, only a modification in perspective is requisite (for the rhetoric remains the same and does not even rely on polysemy for its participation in the various discourses: the existential meaning of suffering is unique); Atalanta's God must no longer be regarded as the source but as the symbol of the implacable verities of existence.

From this new vantage point, Swinburne's contrivance of "the supreme evil, God" is justified by a third motive: the need to express--albeit through the dramatic and propitious medium of a theistic perspective--the existential awareness that he, the atheist, had come to. Thus far, Swinburne's "existential awareness" has been assumed; it needs now to be substantiated. The Existential "way of thinking" is not voluntarily adopted by any individual; it only becomes the authentic philosophy of a deeply-conscious individual who is, through the medium of an experiential catalyst, afforded a glimpse into the pulsative meaning of existence.⁴ In The Fabric of Existentialism,

⁴ The necessity for an experiential cause to precede and spur existential meditation constitutes a fundamental tenet of this philosophy, which derives its very name from the importance it attributes to "lived experience," the impassioned or deeply-resonant repercussions of an extreme situation. Most studies on Existential philosophers are, in fact, preceded by the exposition of such incidents or situations which had awakened these philosophers to existential consciousness.

Gill and Sherman submit that such consciousness results from one's involvement in a "boundary situation":

...the extreme and unavoidable situations that bring man to the limit, to the very boundary of existence, where he must face the antinomies and ambiguities of the human condition itself. Among the typical boundary situations . . . are chance and contingency, choice, guilt, and, above all, death. These situations are viewed as so many walls, hedging man in. Once encountered, they force the individual to recognize his own finitude and challenge him to realize his true self.⁵

On September 25, 1863, Swinburne's favourite sister, Edith, died. Swinburne, "hard hit" (Letters I, 90), had spent "several of the last hopeless months of my sister's illness . . . in weary expectation of the end" (Letters, III, 93). While this loss occasioned the rest of the family "exhausted by the emotional strain of her long illness," to seek "solace and change in a continental tour,"⁶ Algernon went to stay at the Gordon residence. His cousin, Mary Gordon, later Mrs. Disney Leith, recalls that when he arrived, in October, he was "engaged on 'Atalanta in Calydon' . . . It was begun when he came to us."⁷

If Edith died on September 25 and Swinburne was at his cousin's home in October, the short interval must have been spent in the

⁵ Introd. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 22.

⁶ Cecil Y. Lang, "Swinburne's Lost Love," PMLA, 74, No. 1 (March 1959), p. 128.

⁷ The Boyhood of Algernon Charles Swinburne... (London: Chatto & Windus, 1917), p. 19. Mrs. Leith adds that she had first read the opening Chorus: "When the hounds..." during this stay.

arrangements and civilities of his sister's funeral as well as in the subsequent preparations for his family's departure. It seems, then, most likely that Swinburne had started Atalanta in the course of those "several hopeless months" of Edith's illness rather than immediately after her death. Although it is not impossible that Swinburne might have managed to add to Atalanta within that brief and busy interval, it seems hardly plausible that he would have had the time, energy or inspiration to involve himself in a fresh enterprise. Rather, the several-months of his sister's illness would have provided Swinburne with ample time and reason to reflect on the problem of death. The menace which then hovered over the Swinburne household was, in effect, infiltrating Atalanta.

It is impossible to determine whether this sorrowful circumstance--be it Edith's illness or, less likely, her death--influenced Swinburne's selection of the Meleager myth in which he may have discerned an appropriate thematic potential; or, whether having previously opted for the story, the poet's saddened and revolted intellect manipulated it accordingly. Whatever the causality may have been, there can be no doubt but that the effect, on Swinburne, of these distressing moments, was poetically translated in Atalanta.⁸

The pathetic figure of the dying Meleager gradually and irreversibly

⁸ Swinburne writes to Lady Trevelyan on "March 15, 1865" (shortly after the publication of Atalanta) of "the funereal circumstances which I suspect have a little deepened the natural colours of Greek fatalism here and there, so as to have already incurred a charge of 'rebellious antagonism' and such like things" (Letters, I, 115). The understatement of this influence on Atalanta is no doubt due to Swinburne's reluctance--as was shown in the previous chapter--to admit to anything which may have adulterated the Classicism of his play.

consumed by a fiery death--although this constitutes the last scene of the play, it was composed shortly after Edith's death⁹--may certainly be seen as a dramatic reconstitution of this tragic event. The play, which Swinburne would take a year to finish, bears, in its entirety, the emotional scars and philosophical evidence of these months spent in constant apprehension of death.

Swinburne's own "boundary situation" had then been an encounter with death. That this encounter was vicarious does not preclude the potency of its stirring effect. William Barrett paraphrases Kierkegaard on this point:

Despair is never ultimately over the external object but always over ourselves . . . for all cases of loss . . . The unbearable loss is not really in itself unbearable; what we cannot bear is that in being stripped of an external object we stand denuded and see the intolerable abyss of the self yawn at our feet.¹⁰

Peter Koestenbaum, in The Vitality of Death: Essays in Existential Psychology and Philosophy, speaks of the "death--or the threatened death--of a relative or someone close to us" as being "a close reminder of our own death." He adds that "We cannot easily control the anxiety,

⁹ In a letter dated "December 31 /1863/," and written from the Gordon residence, Swinburne says: "I have done some more of my Atalanta which will be among my great doings if it keeps up with its own last scenes throughout" (Letters, I, 93).

¹⁰ Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy (New York: Doubleday, 1958), p. 151.

hysteria and nausea that overcomes us when we are [thus] confronted with the immediate threat of our own death." Whereas death had been regarded previously as the "death of others," such existential situations ominously transform its apprehension; it becomes the "death of myself."¹¹

In Swinburne's case, his sister's protracted illness and eventual death were the catalysts which "Once encountered . . . force the individual to recognize his own finitude." Judging from the existential preoccupations of Atalanta, Swinburne had been unmistakably meditating during "those several hopeless months" on the implacable reality of human finitude. In witnessing Edith's undeserved death take its precocious toll, Swinburne must have pondered the dismal fact of human contingency; and his own powerlessness to prevent or thwart the progressive devastation of this arbitrary and unappealable death must have revealed the frustrating evidence of human impotence. Swinburne had, in those moments, indubitably perceived in "the intolerable abyss of the self," his own nothingness. Rather than denying Swinburne's Existentialism on untenable anachronistic grounds, we should allow it to emerge from its Classical context so as to declare the "enfant terrible" of the nineteenth century among the first atheist Existentialists; albeit he would not have known what the second term meant.

Again, it must be stressed that had Swinburne merely expatiated on one or two Existential themes, Atalanta would not be regarded as the

¹¹ (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1971), p. 4.

work of an Existentialist. The ramifications of the following discussion may be misleading insofar as the respective treatment of the various themes may accentuate their universal, rather than Existential, character. Yet, it must be recognized that all Existential themes have been pondered before the institution of this philosophy: independently, none is necessarily of an Existential nature; chance, death, ephemerality and so on, are perennial subjects of meditation. Existentialism denotes the reunion, so to speak, of all these themes and an experiential or requisitely profound comprehension of them as the ineluctable framework of existence. This comprehensive recognition of the implacable verities of existence is dramatized in Atalanta, wherein Swinburne attends to all Existential themes here enumerated by Barrett:

Alienation and estrangement; a sense of the basic fragility and contingency of human life; the impotence of reason confronted with the depths of existence; the threat of Nothingness, and the solitary and unsheltered condition of the individual before this threat. (p. 31)

and Swinburne unknowingly joins the company of all Existential philosophers regrouped by Camus in this fact of their common starting-point: "tous sont partis de cet univers indicible où règnent la contradiction, l'antinomie, l'angoisse ou l'impuissance."¹²

Marcel Mounier claims that "Tout existentialisme . . . qu'il soit chrétien ou non . . . se caractérise toujours . . . par une conception

¹² Le Mythe de Sisyphe: essai sur l'absurde (1942; rpt. Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 39.

singulièrement dramatique du destin de l'homme."¹³ This is certainly the life-picture conveyed by Atalanta, which as Lafourcade submits, "repose sur un pessimisme profond" (La Jeunesse, II, 389). Suffering permeates the universe of Swinburne's play, a universe which is in effect governed by "the law of tears" (p. 312):

Yea, and with weariness of lips and eyes,
With breaking of the bosom, and with sighs,
We labour, and are clad and fed with grief
And filled with days we would not fain behold
And nights we would not hear of. (p. 286)

And further, Mounier specifies that "Chez l'existentialiste non chrétien [meaning atheistic], la contingence de l'existence . . . prend . . . le caractère . . . d'irrationalité pure et d'absurdité brutale" (p. 90). These last words may be used as an epigram to the portrait, reproduced in the last chapter, of "the supreme evil, God." All divine activities were there perceived as regulated by paradox or contradiction and characterized, in fact, by the most brutal absurdity and the purest irrationality.

The next step in this analysis should be to suggest that these prominent features of Atalanta's divine personality signal its appurtenance to the realm, not of theology, but of Existential rhetoric and reality. And yet, the crucial element which allegedly prompts the absurd and contradictory behavior of the gods--evil--is not contained in these Existential terms. If Swinburne is, in effect, speaking the language of atheistic Existentialism, there can be no room for an evil

¹³ "Introduction aux Existentialismes," [1947]; rpt. in Vol. 3 of Oeuvres de Mounier (Paris: Seuil, 1962), p. 88.

volition.

However, to the dejected individual, albeit an atheist, the term "arbitrary" seems to divest itself of "impartiality," as it were, so to take on its more agitated connotations of "irrationality," "impulsiveness," or "tyranny."¹⁴ Although such an individual is rationally cognizant that no evil volition directs the conditions of existence; that these are neutral or impartial; the desolation which ensues from their encounter inspires a negative, rather than an innocuous perception. Thus Mounier describes the absurdity perceived by atheist Existentialists as "brutal" and thus Camus, an atheist, refers to "les sanglantes mathématiques qui ordonnent notre condition" (p. 30). Ralph A. Ciancio points out the Existential equation between the neutrality and the hostility of the universe:

. . . according to Existentialist metaphysics the universe is a dimension of full Being, that density which resists man and provokes nausea in that it makes manifest to the For-itself For itself's contingency. Indifferent toward man, it is hostile toward man. (p. 82)

Beside the iconoclastic motivation which led Swinburne to depict "God" as "the supreme evil", there had then been the Existential impulse to thus subjectivize the arbitrary, projecting it as negative. Swinburne had therefore translated the sense or feeling of an implacable

¹⁴ Webster's Third New International Dictionary, 1966 and Roget's International Thesaurus, Fourth Edition, 1977.

injustice which must have overwhelmed him as he witnessed the unalterable progression of his sister's premature demise.

In The Rhetoric of Religion, Kenneth Burke expounds on this human inclination to subjectivize what is really but "a species of the negative" (in the sense of negation):

Logologically, moral "evil" is a species of negative, a purely linguistic (or rational) principle. And insofar as natural calamities are viewed in terms of moral retribution, we should say that the positive events of nature are being seen through the eyes of moral negativity (another instance of the ways whereby the genius of the verbal and socio-political orders can come to permeate our ideas of the natural order). (p. 195)

And thus, inasmuch as Atalanta's personae are theists, they view natural calamities--if not in terms of "moral retribution," for the gods operate under no ethical code--as emanating from a "supreme evil," an entitative evil. The atheistic Existential discourse, however, would side with Burke in his definition of evil and regard God as precisely a "species of the negative;" in fact, the "supreme" negative.

Such an interpretation coincides with Swinburne's endeavour to establish the negativity of "God", that is the non-existence of God; and it concurs, moreover, with his Existential motive. That is, in view of the play's insistent depiction of God's negation of all positives, his infestation of all life with death, "He" symbolizes life's supreme negation, the symbol of the "supreme" existential condition--death or nothingness.

The threatening "God" of Calydon--whose activities defy rationality, expectation or justice, whose presence renders existence

precarious, derisory, ephemeral and painful; whose supremacy and ubiquity cannot be waived¹⁵--is, in fact, the embodiment of the "dreadful" omnipresence of "nothingness." It is this threat which hovers over the dramatic universe of Atalanta in Calydon, as it had over Swinburne's own universe. That this threat should be perceived in negative terms is perfectly understandable: "Death," to use Nicolas Berdyaev's words, is "the supreme horror and evil" (p. 249); and to Camus, "la mort exalte l'injustice. Elle est le suprême abus" (p. 121).

The tone of finality which envelops even a discussion on death is perhaps a signal to postpone the examination of Atalanta's last word on the subject until other components of the Existential discourse have been scrutinized. The fundamental objective of the present analysis is, again, to reinterpret the "divine" characteristics in an atheistic Existential light; in fact, to demonstrate that Atalanta's "God" represents, and does not regulate, the conditions of existence. Having thus shown that the qualification of the conditions of existence as evil is compatible with the Existential motive, the earlier proposition to equate the absurdity and irrationality exhibited by Atalanta's God to the same conditions apprehended existentially may be resumed.

Passages relating the paradoxical, irrational, absurd, and thus chaotic activities of the Calydonian God(s) have amply filled

¹⁵ Recall the explicit recognition of God's supremacy even within the Chorus' most belligerent statement: "All we are against you, against you, O God most high."

expresses respect for a death which comes with age:²²

But when white age and venerable death
Mow down the strength and life within their limbs,
Drain out the blood and darken their clear eyes,
Immortal honour is on them, having past
Through splendid life and death desirable. (p. 266)

Moreover, death is deemed as "strong and full of blood and fair /
And perdurable and like a lord of land" (p. 284) in the verses immediately
following the speech metaphor. Hence the invulnerability and vitality,
as it were, of death, are valued for the anticipated application of death
to God. Finally, death is recognized as the end of existential strife.
Althaea acknowledges the repose and oblivion inherent in death:

... for all,
There shines one sun and one wind blows till night.
And where night comes the wind sinks and the sun,
And there is no light after, and no storm,
But sleep and much forgetfulness of things. (pp. 257-58)

This last apprehension of death is most in keeping with that
articulated in Swinburne's other poems but it is not suffused, as they

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The following verses are not only emulative of the Classical
reverence for an honorable death which is the culmination of a
respectable and fruitful life; they were inspired by Landor's death,
reported to Swinburne in September 1864. He avers this circumstantial
inspiration in a letter to Lady Trevelyan: "You will recognize the
allusion to his /Landor's/ life and death at pp. 25, 26" (Letters, I,
115). (Having examined a copy of the original edition of Atalanta
/London: Moxon, 1865/, I have found no such allusion on pp. 25 and
26, but rather on pp. 29 and 30, from which the following verses are
extracted. This may be explained as simply a mistake on Swinburne's
part or he might have been referring to a manuscript copy).

are, with an escapist aspiration to enter "The Garden of Proserpine." With the exception of Althaea's death-wish--"I would I were not here in sight of the sun" (p. 301)--which is circumstantially justifiable in that she has just been informed that her son has killed her two brothers; there is not, in Atalanta, the impassioned yearning for death which echoes throughout Poems and Ballads.²³

If Swinburne's characteristic appreciation of the solace that is death curtails an unqualified denunciation of death in Atalanta, his denigration of an arbitrary and unjust death is, however, integral. Atalanta's most emphatic portrayal of death bears the circumstantial and existential imprint of Edith's premature and undeserved demise which had revealed to Swinburne the non-optionality, as it were, of death. He had realized that death does not passively await the actualization of the suicidal wish, nor is it always the timely termination of a full-fledged existence. Death is vital; it permeates life, imposing itself unexpectedly, gratuitously, and unappealably on a precarious existence.

Swinburne's depiction of the infestation of death in all life was discussed in the preceding chapter. Here, however, the new perspective shifts the focus from the culpability of "God" to the representativeness of "God." Atalanta's divinity represents the virulent

²³ In fact, subsequent to her death-wish is Althaea's stoic resolution to admit, and live with, existential limitations (albeit this is uttered in an opportune moment, as a tentative to justify her imminent filicide):

But all the gods will, all they do, and we
Not all we would, yet somewhat; and one choice
We have, to live and do just deeds and die. (p. 309)

presence of death in life; "He" is the dramatic embodiment of the ever-impending threat of "nothingness" which enshrouds the course of human existence. Thus, is Swinburne's prise de conscience poetically translated; and its bearing is undeniably Existential: it concurs with Ralph A. Ciancio's summary description of the Existential significance of death:

Life's absurdity is intensified since man, if he chooses to live authentically, sees that existence is "conditioned by death." The reality of man's inevitable annihilation is a presence he cannot elude, and toward which, according to Heidegger, he is "forward-running." Death is a presence--not something confronted in the future, not something which stands ahead of him like some remote beacon perceivable at a distance. Man is bounded by death; it is a part of the structure of his existence, as is the rind of an apple to its fruit. It is also the inexorable termination of man's drive to complete himself, the impossibility of possibilities.. Facing death, however, man becomes cognizant of the salient characteristics of his existence--its finiteness--and begins to understand his existence. (p. 79)

And Meleager, facing his death, acquires precisely this existential awareness:

. . . this death was mixed with all my life,
Mine end with my beginning: and this law,
This only slays me . . . (p. 331)

An old proverb cited by Heidegger epitomizes this morbid condition of life: "As soon as we are born, we are old enough to die." This is one of the verities recurrently illustrated in Atalanta and the "brand" is its primary symbol.²⁴ Meleager was born to die, almost

²⁴ This should be seen as the Existential equivalent of the leitmotif invoked in the iconoclastic discourse: "créer pour détruire."

simultaneously, had Althaea not removed the brand from the fire; and he carries this death throughout his "ashen life" (p. 331). Not only Meleager's, but all life in Atalanta is thus "mixed" with death. Even in nature are "blind things dead in their birth" (p. 276); all positives are infested with their own negations and the "word" which is life is also poisoned with death.

Such insistent and permeating iterations of the presence of death in life radiate from an Existential awareness which is, as Heidegger claims, immersed in dread or anguish; an awareness that "Death is not something not yet present-at-hand, nor is it that which is ultimately still outstanding but which has been reduced to a minimum. Death is something that stands before us--something impending."²⁵ This fact of our "thrownness into death," adds Heidegger, "reveals itself . . . in a primordial and impressive manner in that state of mind which we have called 'anxiety' . . . Anxiety in the face of death must not be confused with fear in the face of one's demise. This anxiety is not an accidental or random mood of 'weakness' in some individual; but, as a basic state-of-mind of Dasein [being there; being-in-the-world], it amounts to the disclosedness of the fact that Dasein exists as thrown Being towards its end" (p. 421)

Swinburne transmits this anxiety which had framed his encounter with his own "nothingness" to Althaea and the Chorus. Throughout the

²⁵ Trans. from Being and Time by Gill and Sherman, p. 420.

play, both maintain an "anxious" state of mind wherein death is constantly apprehended as an imminent possibility. They recognize the unpredictability and the gratuitousness of death; and in their repetitive allusions to its "suddenness" emphasize their own contingency:

For not seldom when all air
As bright water without breath
Shines, and when men fear not, fate
Without thunder unaware
Breaks, and brings down death. (p. 298)

And Althaea is thus "Flecked with the sudden drops of death" (p. 310). No warning is secured; not even that which would sensibly prevent the committing of "sin" and hence the punitive--in a chaotic sense, for there is no ethical code--infliction of death:

For madness have ye given us and not health,
And sins whereof we know not; and for these
Death, and sudden destruction unaware. (p. 308)

Whereas Althaea and the Chorus are in constant existential apprehension of "God" as the ubiquitous presence of death in life and the dreadful reminder of their nothingness, Meleager exhibits an unexistential attitude until that time of his authentic confrontation with death. Only in these last moments does he shed his mindlessness and perceive the "law" of existence: "this death was mixed with all my life, / Mine end with my beginning."²⁶ He recognizes his nothingness as inherent in his life and witnesses its actualization.

²⁶ It is this "law" which, approximately seventy years later, will constitute the major postulate of Heidegger's philosophy, although in more sophisticated language: "Death is, as Dasein's end, in the Being of this entity towards its end" (Gill and Sherman, trans., p. 426)

The suggestion that he is "Guiltless" (p. 329) and the fact of his youthfulness:

And all this body a broken barren tree
That was so strong, and all this flower of life
Disbranched and desecrated miserably. (p. 331)

underscore the absurdity of his death. Camus stresses that, to the Existentialist, "une mort prématurée est irréparable" (p. 113); for if death is in itself "le suprême abus," a precocious demise reaches the apex of absurdity.

Meleager is then the victim of the paradoxical and absurd condition of his "ashen life". That "nothingness" which infiltrates the pores of Atalanta's dramatic universe materializes to crush one of its incumbents. Atalanta's "God," "In whose fingers the weight of the world is as breath" (p. 322)--again, the deathly connotation of "breath" is semantically potent here--has instilled in the "eyes" of man "foreknowledge of death" (p. 259); a death which "He" arbitrarily and capriciously wreaks. And thus does the existant exist: in the ever-present possibility of death and constantly "looking toward" death.

Nothingness is intrinsic to the being who has been made "transitory and hazardous" (p. 288) and endowed with "ephemeral lips and casual breath" (p. 289). The choral lament to God that "thy name is life and our name death" has been explicated in terms of the iconoclastic discourse; existentially, however, it signifies God's "life" as really the "vitality" of a death which ominously enshrouds the course of existence and is its culmination.

It is precisely this awareness of the "vitality" of death; of the contingency, ephemerality, isolation and impotence inherent in the human condition which induces the Chorus to pronounce what is undoubtedly the crowning utterance of Atalanta, that which synthesizes its Existential revolt: "All we are against thee, against thee, O God most high" (p. 289). Securing its motivation from the anguished consciousness of the supreme and ever-present threat of death, the Chorus resolves to live authentically. In Heideggerian terms: "It is the dread of death which is ultimately responsible for the 'call of conscience' to be authentic . . . It is foreknowledge of immanent death which forces man 'to take hold of his destiny.'"²⁷

The Chorus asserts itself and thus acquires freedom, as it were, within the acknowledged bounds of existential limitations. Camus describes this Existential revolt:

. . . en face de la contradiction essentielle
je soutiens mon humaine contradiction.
J'installe ma lucidité au milieu de ce qui la nie.
J'exalte l'homme devant ce qui l'écrase et ma
liberté, ma révolte et ma passion se rejoignent
alors dans cette tension, cette clairvoyance. (p. 119)

The Chorus' "clairvoyance"--"that these things are not otherwise but thus" (p. 289), meaning that the irrationality, paradox, absurdity and

²⁷ Robert C. Solomon, "Martin Heidegger: Being and Being Human," From Rationalism to Existentialism: The Existentialists and Their Nineteenth Century Backgrounds (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 226.

precariousness of existence which it has just described are irrefutable--spurs, not resignation, but awakening. It arouses the Chorus from a passive existence to action, to the necessity of endowing life with meaning and authenticity: "At least we witness of thee ere we die" (p. 289).

Just as the dreadful awareness of existential limitations may lead to resignation or suicide, it may, paradoxically, promote a more intense engagement in life; this is the culminative resolution of Existentialism, here summarized by Camus:

Je tire ainsi de l'absurde trois conséquences
qui sont ma révolte, ma liberté et ma passion.
Par le seul jeu de la conscience, je transforme
en règle de vie ce qui était invitation à la mort--
et je refuse le suicide. (p. 88)

The freedom that can be obtained is, to be sure, a circumscribed freedom; for it is enclosed in nothingness. Yet, within the limited span, and amidst the existential obstacles, of life, there is the freedom to live one's life: "Assuré de sa liberté à terme, de sa révolte sans avenir et de sa conscience périssable, il [the Existential individual] poursuit son aventure dans le temps de sa vie. Là est son champ, là son action" (p. 93). And Sartre, for one, would say that the Chorus has enjoyed "The essential freedom, the ultimate and final freedom that cannot be taken from a man, [that which] is to say No" (Barrett's interpretation, p. 215), as it pronounces the words which signal its own Existential revolt: "And all we are against thee, against thee, O God most high."

Chapter 4

The Existential Revolt

The exhortative note of Atalanta--"All we are against thee, against thee, O God most high"--takes impetus from its iconoclastic thrust to project an existential declaration of self-assertion. This self-affirmation should not be viewed as the corollary of an impulsive and impetuous rebuttal which culminates from the mounting weariness of being excessively abused only to wane gradually in calmer after-thought. The Chorus is acting upon no rash and temporary fit of anger or frustration: it lucidly engages in an Existential revolt--that which demands a life-long pledge and which is hopelessly doomed to failure.

The very terms which articulate this Existential revolt define it. It is a hopeless revolt in that it acknowledges the supremacy and implacability of its adversary--"O God most high"--; in existential language: the insuperability of the tribulations, irrationality, precariousness and finitude of existence. But it is an authentic, Existential revolt which refuses passivity or surrender--"All we are against thee"--even as it recognizes the ineffectuality of its venture. Camus elucidates this point: " . . . la révolte métaphysique étend la conscience tout le long de l'expérience . . . Elle n'est pas aspiration, elle est sans espoir. Cette révolte n'est que l'assurance d'un destin écrasant, moins la résignation qui devrait l'accompagner" (p. 77).

That self-pity in which the Chorus indulges as it lamentingly delineates its existential shortcomings is itself a prerequisite to the

Existential revolt. It translates no pathos or weakness, but rather the lucidity and strength which Camus regards as indispensable to probe an abysmal reality:

Notre destin est en face de nous et c'est lui que nous provoquons. Moins par orgueil que par conscience de notre condition sans portée. Nous aussi, nous avons parfois pitié de nous-mêmes. C'est la seule compassion qui nous semble acceptable: un sentiment que peut-être vous ne comprendrez guère et qui vous semble peu viril. Pourtant ce sont les plus audacieux d'entre nous qui l'éprouvent . . . nous appelons virils les lucides et nous ne voulons pas d'une force qui se sépare de la clairvoyance. (p. 122)

Nietzsche similarly extolls lucidity and strength in his Zarathustra:

"He who sees the abyss, but with an eagle's eyes--he who grasps the abyss with an eagle's claws: he possesses courage."¹

If lucidity breeds despair--for the existential revelation is a despairing one--the courage which had prompted lucidity in the first place survives through that despair which it encounters; annihilates it and installs, in its stead, self-assertion: ". . . into all abysses do I carry my consecrating declaration Yes," proclaims Zarathustra (p. 186). Rather than allow despair or the abyss to engulf its spirit, the Chorus enacts precisely that which Camus defines as the alternative to resignation or suicide: "en face de la contradiction essentielle, je soutiens mon humaine contradiction. J'installe ma lucidité au milieu

¹ Thus Spoke Zarathustra/1885/ trans. R.J. Hollingdale (1961; rpt. Ontario: Penguin, 1976), p. 298. All further references to Nietzsche's "novel," hereafter cited as Zarathustra, are to this edition and appear in the text.

de ce qui la nie. J'exalte l'homme devant ce qui l'écrase et ma liberté, ma révolte et ma passion se rejoignent alors dans cette tension, cette clairvoyance . . . Oui, l'homme est sa propre fin. Et il est sa seule fin. S'il veut être quelque chose, c'est dans cette vie" (p. 119).

The consciousness of existential vicissitudes and the certitude of contingency, rather than intimate resignation or suicide, may then blare an urgent call to life and action. "Death," says Nietzsche, "must be transformed into a means of victory and triumph."² And the Chorus, from within the anguished awareness of its own contingency--in fact, because of it--chooses the manner in which to live its life. Rejecting passivity and surrender, it awakens to authenticity, which demands defiance: "At least we witness of thee ere we die / That these things are not otherwise, but thus" (p. 289).

One may then say that by becoming conscious of its own nothingness, the Chorus is freed from it. That is, inasmuch as this consciousness spurs the act of defiance which is, according to Sartre,

² "Explanatory Notes to Thus Spake Zarathustra," in The Twilight of the Idols..., trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, vol. XVI of The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, ed. Dr. Oscar Levy (1909-1911; rpt. New York: Russell, 1964, p. 273. All further references to Nietzsche's "Explanatory Notes..." hereafter cited as "Notes", are to this edition and appear in the text. And in Ecce Homo/1908, Nietzsche lauds his own Zarathustra for casting, from the depths of existential negation, a resonant cry of affirmation: "Zarathustra is a dancer-- . . . he that has the hardest, most terrible insight into reality, that has thought the 'most abysmal idea,' nevertheless does not consider it an objection to existence . . . but rather one reason more for being himself the eternal Yes to all things" (Trans. Walter Kaufmann in Basic Writings of Nietzsche / New York: Random, 1966. rpt. New York: Modern Library, 1968 /, p. 762).

"[t]he essential freedom, the ultimate and final freedom," the Chorus disengages itself from the bonds of a passive servitude and imposes its own irrefutable reality within an overwhelming nothingness. But moreover, the awareness of contingency prods the resolution to make "something" of life: to reconsider the quality of existence and thus adopt a defiant authenticity--"At least we witness of thee"--and to acknowledge the potentiality and urgency in whatever span of life is to be had: "ere we die."

It is, however, the existential follow-up of this revolt which injects the span of life with meaning: "Cette révolte donne son prix à la vie," submits Camus, "[é]tendue sur toute la longueur d'une existence, elle lui restitue sa grandeur . . . il [l']homme révolté sait que dans cette conscience et dans cette révolte au jour le jour, il témoigne de sa seule vérité qui est le défi" (pp. 78-79). Awareness and revolt as well as the "action" which the daily pursuit of that revolt implicates--these "fulfill" life; give it meaning and in this sense, avert it from its own nothingness.

Yet if Swinburne heralds the Existential revolt in Atalanta, he does not therein delineate its pursuit. The Chorus' declaration is momentous in that it signals and initiates the adoption of a rebellious and self-assertive attitude, but the existential actualization of the revolt--that day-to-day "action" which ensues from awareness and the pronouncement of the revolt--is not dramatized in the play. In order to witness the poetic application of this Existential utterance, the reader must leave the meditative atmosphere of Atalanta and enter the energetic ebullience of Songs before Sunrise.

It may then be claimed of Atalanta in Calydon that it is that missing link so earnestly sought by critics in an effort to reconcile or at best, justify, the thematic and affective disparities between Poems and Ballads, First Series and Songs before Sunrise. The play represents the prise de conscience which had induced Swinburne to abandon the complacency and escapism of Poems and Ballads and assume that existential engagement expressed in Songs before Sunrise; that engagement which, alone, could secure the meaningfulness and purpose necessary to attenuate the despair of nothingness.

In his "Dedication, 1865" of Poems and Ballads (1866),³ which exhibits all the features of an "Envoy" and is, in fact, the last poem of the volume, Swinburne bids farewell to "My verses, the firstfruits of me":

Leaves pallid and sombre and ruddy,
Dead fruits of the fugitive years;
Some stained as with wine and made bloody,
And some as with tears. (I, 293)

And of "Faustine, Fragoletta, Dolores, / Félise and Yolande and Juliette," the poet says: "They are past as a slumber that passes, / As the dew of a dawn of old time" (I, 294).

Swinburne has, in effect, awakened from his slumber. The incessant hankering for unconsciousness and the repeated death-wish of Poems and Ballads cease. The poet, in putting behind him

³ Most poems in this volume were composed before Atalanta, in 1862.

"The songs of dead seasons" (I, 294), the "Dead fruits of the fugitive years," progresses from escapism to confrontation. The "Dedication," composed in 1865, subsequent to Atalanta, is a product of the existential awareness and sagacity attached to the play. The "Dedication" closes not only the poet's first volume, but relates as well the end of Swinburne's youth which had, in fact, terminated with the experience of Atalanta. There is no gap between Swinburne's first two volumes of poetry: there is Atalanta in Calydon; and there is, more specifically, the Chorus' Existential revolt which triggers and points toward that "action" which will be poetically effected in Songs before Sunrise.

Atalanta translates Swinburne's own existential revolt. From the abyss of nothingness, he had summoned the will to life and action. Barrett's description of the rationale which prompted Sartre's existential engagement may serve to elucidate the poet's own motivation:

For Sartre . . . the nothingness of the Self is the basis for the will to action: the bubble is empty and will collapse, and so what is left of us but the energy and passion to spin that bubble out? Man's existence is absurd in the midst of a cosmos that knows him not; the only meaning he can give himself is through the free project that he launches out of his nothingness not to compassion or holiness, but to human freedom as realized in revolutionary activity. (p. 220)

Nietzsche's own "nihilism," as Hollingdale submits, is similarly "followed . . . by a call to action, battle and positive commitment" (Introd., Zarathustra, p. 18).

Swinburne has matured into a full-fledged revolutionary and

philosophical poet. In the "Prelude"⁴ which opens Songs before Sunrise, Swinburne adumbrates his intellectual and affective evolution. The first two stanzas are a recapitulation of the "Dedication": they relate the poet's youthful mindlessness--"Time's truth / Was half not harsh in the ears of youth"--and describe the sterile and introverted nature of his past preoccupations: "Delight whose germ grew never grain, / And passion dyed in its own pain" (II, 3). In the third stanza, the youth then rises to a more lucid awareness and will; arrayed in "strength" and "thought," he supplants the languishing spirit with that of freedom:

Then he stood up, and trod to dust.
 Fear and desire, mistrust and trust,
 And dreams of bitter sleep and sweet,
 And bound for sandals on his feet
 Knowledge and patience of what must
 And what things may be in the heat
 And cold of years that rot and rust
 And alter; and his spirit's meat
 Was freedom, and his staff was wrought
 Of strength, and his cloak woven of thought.
 For what has he whose will sees clear
 To do with doubt and faith and fair,
 Swift hopes and slow despondencies? (II, 4)

The "Prelude" undeniably reflects the profound change in Swinburne's own state of mind and outlook. On "October 9/1866/," the poet writes to W.M. Rossetti: "After all in spite of jokes and perversities--*malgré ce cher Marquis et ces foutus journaux*--it is nice to have something to love and to believe in as I do in Italy. It was only Gabriel and his followers in art (*l'art pour l'art*) who for a time

⁴ Swinburne says in a letter dated "April 21, 1870" that he has "just finished" the "Prelude" (Letters, I, 110)

frightened me from speaking out; for ever since I was fifteen I have been equally and unalterably mad--tête montée, as my Mother says--about this article of faith" (Letters, I, 195-96).

Whatever the distraction may in fact have been which prevented Swinburne from previously attending to this "article of faith," he was unmistakably spurred to "action" by his own existential revolt. The existential nature of his revolt may be measured not only in terms of its motivation, but, as well, in terms of the profundity and authenticity of Swinburne's revolutionary or ideological fervour.

Further on, in the same letter, the poet writes:

. . . just as one hears that intense desire has made men impotent at the right (or wrong) minute, my passionate wish to express myself in part, for a little, about this matter, has twice and thrice left me exhausted and incompetent: unable to write, or to decide if what has been written is or is not good. I never felt this about my poems on other subjects; and I'd give a year of my life to accomplish the writing of a really great song on this one. If national or translatable, so much the better; but anyhow, I feel with child (and probably abortive) till I have emitted something. (p. 196)

Of Songs before Sunrise, Edmund Gosse remarks that "To the end of his life he [Swinburne] continued to regard it as the most intimate, the most sincere, and the most important of all his writings."⁵ And Swinburne was in fact redolent with pride and satisfaction for "'Songs before Sunrise'--incomparably my best bit of work . . . if (as I believe)

⁵ The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne, 4th ed. [1918], vol. XIX of 1925 Bonchurch Edition, p. 178.

that is a man's best work into which he has put most of his heart and soul and faith and hope" (Letters, IV, 17). The poet does not lavish praise on Songs before Sunrise unqualifyingly; he consistently invokes a "personal" standard; relating the work to himself (a far cry from his early esthetic convictions): it is "my ripest and carefulest--and out of sight my most personal and individual work" (Letters, II, 138). Swinburne's well-known assessment of Songs before Sunrise should adequately render the "existential" nature of the volume; the profundity and authenticity of its expression: "my other books are books; but that one is myself" (Letters III, 35).

Swinburne's will to action was not--as has often been assumed--prompted by his meeting with Mazzini. He had written his "Ode on the Insurrection of Candia" (which he subsequently sent to Mazzini) and his "Song of Italy" before any epistolary or personal prod by the "Chief."⁶ Swinburne merely found, in Italian politics, an opportune circumstance in which to actualize his need for action. As McGann suggests, "Swinburne was taking the contemporary struggles in Italy as the occasion for a series of poems on the idea and fact of revolution not only in contemporary Italy but in all Europe and, in fact, in any time or place" (p. 240).

In his interview of Swinburne, Paul de Reul had inquired as to

⁶ Mazzini wrote Swinburne to thank him for the Ode (completed in Jan. 1867) and urging him to pursue his "crusade" on March 10, 1867. By Feb. 1867, the "Song of Italy" was completed. Hence, both poems were composed before Swinburne met Mazzini on March 30, 1867.

the identity of the old man in "Thalassius"--Swinburne's alleged autobiographical poem--Swinburne's answer: "Je ne sais pas . . . plutôt Landor"; "Et Mazzini?" questions de Reul; "J'ai vénéré Mazzini plus que personne," replies the poet, "mais il n'a pas fait mes idées" (p. 127).

This primary allegiance to Landor underscores the universal aspect of Swinburne's "battle." Swinburne's revolutionary ardour was not geographically but philosophically determined. McGann adds that in Songs before Sunrise, "Rome and the Republic are states of mind rather than states of affairs" (p. 254). And, in fact, Swinburne's interest in Italy will be superseded by his preoccupation with France. "L'humanitarisme de Swinburne à ce moment ne connaît pas de frontières," corroborates de Reul, "les nations l'intéressent en raison de leurs combats pour un idéal. De là, sa prédilection pour l'Italie, pour la France, de là sa sévérité pour sa patrie qu'il juge morte, indifférente, plongée dans une routine égoïste, déchue temporairement de sa mission" (p. 229):

Canst thou sit shamed and self-contemplative
 With soulless eyes on thy secluded fate?
 Though time forgive them, thee shall he forgive,
 Whose choice was in thine hand to be so great?
 Who cast out of thy mind
 The passion of man's kind
 And made thee and thine old name separate?
 ("The Eve of Revolution",
 II, 19)

This is certainly reminiscent of Swinburne's own indifference and self-contemplation which he sheds to take up "poetic" arms and, in de Reul's

words, "au lieu de se dérober vers le rêve regardera la vie" (p. 215):

Etonnant contraste de deux ouvrages! Là
/Poems and Ballads/ des visions de fièvre
 . . . une averse sensualité d'artiste qui met la
 nature au pillage, dépouille l'univers de tout
 ce qu'il a de couleurs, de saveurs et d'odeurs;
 puis, /Songs before Sunrise/ cette imagination
 tout à coup assagie, ne tendant plus, de toutes
 les forces de son pouvoir, qu'à concevoir et
 embrasser un idéal abstrait, austère, purement
 spirituel, situé par-delà la forme et l'image:
 l'unique amour de la Liberté, dissipant les
 prestiges de la veille, soufflant sur ces splendeurs
 et ne laissant à leur place régner que la brise
 aigle, l'auguste fraîcheur, des sommets où l'on
 plane, où l'on aspire, où l'on espère. (p. 214)

Not so "astonishing" or "sudden" when we necessarily admit
 the enlightening and thematically cohesive presence of Atalanta between
 these two volumes.⁷ For it must be remembered that the play signals the
 will to action and the will to live and contains, moreover, Swinburne's
 initial recognition of "The holy spirit of man" (p. 259).

Swinburne's "political" poetics were prompted by his own
 existential revolt. He needed an ideal, a course of action which would
 give meaning to his life and he thus engaged himself in the path which
 he had selected at the age of fifteen, but which was not, until sometime
 between 1863 and 1865, authentically "chosen."⁷ As Camus says, "pour un
 coeur fier, il ne peut y avoir de milieu. Il y a Dieu ou le temps, cet-
 te croix ou cette épée" (p. 117). Swinburne evidently chooses the
 latter, which he respectfully lays at Mazzini's feet:

⁷ This statement is meant to evoke the Existential connotations
 of choice and commitment.

I bring you the sword of a song,
The sword of my spirit's desire,
Feeble; but laid at your feet,
That which was weak shall be strong,
That which was cold shall take fire,
That which was bitter be sweet.

("Dedication to Joseph Mazzini",
II, vi)

But whatever immediate or specific cause Swinburne upholds, his is a universal engagement; an existential pledge to time or action, rather than to that other alternative invoked by Camus:

He hath given himself and hath not sold
To God for heaven or man for gold,
Or grief for comfort that it gives,
Or joy for grief's restoratives.
He hath given himself to time, whose fold
Shuts in the mortal flock that lives
On its plain pasture's heat and cold
And the equal year's alternatives.
Earth, heaven, and time, death, life, and he,
Endure while they shall be to be. ("Prelude", II, 5)

Swinburne's iconoclastic and atheistic Existential motives transcend the poetic medium of Atalanta and coalesce to become the life-long Nietzschean objective which he will expound from Songs before Sunrise on: the death of "God" and the resurrection of "Man." Zarathustra proclaims: "Once you said 'God' when you gazed upon distant seas; but now, I have taught you to say 'Superman'" (p. 109); and this is also "Hertha"'s message:

I that saw where ye trod
The dim paths of the night
Set the shadow called God
In your skies to give light;
But the morning of manhood is risen, and
the shadowless soul is in sight. (II, 75)

Consciousness of human limitations thus spurs an acknowledgement of human possibilities. Camus writes: "Ce qui reste, c'est un destin dont seule l'issue est fatale. En dehors de cette unique fatalité de la mort, tout, joie ou bonheur, est liberté. Un monde demeure dont l'homme est le seul maître" (p. 156). This precisely describes Swinburne's world wherein "Man is the master of things" ("Hymn of Man", II, 104); wherein "Man" is the only perdurable, unequivocal and worthwhile "God":

A God with the world inwound whose clay to
his footsole clings;
A manifold God fast-bound as with iron of
adverse things.
A soul that labours and lives, an emotion,
a strenuous breath,
From the flame that its own mouth gives reillumed,
and refreshed with death.
In the sea whereof centuries are waves the live
God plunges and swims;
His bed is in all men's graves, but the world
hath not hold on his limbs. (p. 96)

Thus is Swinburne's "nihilism" "clarified" much as Nietzsche's nihilism will be; for, as Hollingdale avers: "The joy of the Superman in being as he is, now and ever, is the ultimate sublimation of the will to power and the final overcoming of an otherwise inexorable nihilism" (Intro., Zarathustra, p. 27). Nietzsche's conception of a "Superman" is then comparable to the object of Swinburne's "clarified nihilism": to "worship the divine ~~man~~ humanity, the ideal of human perfection and aspiration, without worshipping any God, any person, any fetish at all" (Letters, III, 14). The only "light" by which the isolation and haphazardness of existence may be confronted; that which attenuates the absurdity and eradicates the purposelessness of

existence is the "soul" or "Man":

Passions and pleasures can defeat,
Actions and agonies control,
And life and death, but not the soul.

Because man's soul is man's God still,
What wind soever waft his will

Across the waves of day and night
To port or shipwreck, left or right,
By shores and shoals of good and ill;
And still its flame at mainmast height
Through the rent air that foam-flakes fill
Sustains the indomitable light
Whence only man hath strength to steer
Or helm to handle without fear.

Save his own soul's light overhead,
None leads him, and none ever led,
Across birth's hidden harbour-bar,
Past youth where shoreward shallows are,
Through age that drives on toward the red
Vast void of sunset hailed from far,
To the equal waters of the dead;
Save his own soul he hath no star,
And sinks, except his own soul guide,
Helmless in middle turn of tide. ("Prelude", II, 7-8)

Swinburne's "soul" is semantically quite flexible: the word is synonymous with "human spirit"; "Man" or the conglomeration of men: "Humanity"; it moreover denotes "Liberty" or "Freedom." Fundamentally, however, the "soul" is the culmination of all these; it may be considered as the perennial human will to an unfettered existence. However blurred or thwarted by religion this drive may be, it must, exhorts Swinburne, be revitalized by "thought" and "strength" into that urgent and meaningful quest for "freedom"—that very quest undertaken by the youth of the "Prelude."

Only "thought" can release the yokes of religion as it deconceptualizes its self-imposed construct: "Thought made him and breaks him" ("Hertha", II, 79). If set in the direction of freedom,

"thought" can no more be assailed and becomes, in fact, the essential liberator of humanity:

Yet one thing is there that ye shall not slay,
Even thought, that fire nor iron can affright.

The woundless and invisible thought that goes
Free throughout time as north or south wind blows.
Far throughout space as east or west sea flows,
And all dark things before it are made bright.

Thy thought, thy word, O soul republican,
O spirit of life, O God whose name is man.

("A Year's Burden", II, 233-34)

Swinburne's "soul," initially stimulated and directed by "thought" resembles Nietzsche's "Ego" which is "a primum mobile" striving "to discover that thought which will remain poised above men like a star" ("Notes", p. 267); "this creating, willing, evaluating Ego, which is the measure and value of things . . . My Ego taught me a new pride, I teach it to men: No longer to bury the head in the sand of heavenly things, but to carry it freely, an earthly head which creates meaning for the earth!" (Zarathustra, p. 60).

Swinburne proclaims that only the "Self-established, the sufficing soul" can reinstitute the supremacy of "Man." And before "Man" can reclaim his rightful sovereignty, a "holy insurrection" must be effected. "Man" must avert his gaze from his self-fabricated tyrant and look toward himself:

But what thing dost thou now,
Looking Godward, to cry
"I am I, thou art thou,
I am low, thou art high"?
I am thou, whom thou seekest to find him;
find thou but thyself, thou art I.

.....

A creed is a rod,
 And a crown is of night,
 But this thing is God,
 To be man with thy might,
 To grow straight in the strength of thy
 spirit, and live out thy life as the
 light. ("Hertha", II, 73, 75)

Swinburne's advocacy of the annihilation of the concept of God and the restoration of responsibility, commitment and self-sufficiency anticipates Nietzsche's word on the subject, expounded in The Gay

Science:

You will never pray again, never adore again,
 never again rest in endless trust; you do not
 permit yourself to stop before any ultimate
 wisdom, ultimate goodness, ultimate power, while
 unharnessing your thoughts; you have no perpetual
 guardian and friend for your seven solitudes;
 there is no avenger for you any more nor any final
 improver; there is no longer any reason in what
 happens . . . no resting place is open to your
 heart, where it only needs to find and no longer to
 seek; you resist any ultimate peace . . . perhaps
 man will rise even higher as soon as he ceases to
flow out into a god.⁸

And as Swinburne reasons in the "Prelude":

Him can no God cast down, whom none
 Can lift in hope beyond the height
 Of fate and nature and things done
 By the calm rule of might and right
 That bids men be and bear and do,
 And die beneath blind skies or blue. (II, 4)

Self-reliance promotes an existential apprehension and confrontation of life. The Existential revolt, signalled by Atalanta's

⁸ Trans. Walter Kaufmann based on the 2nd ed., 1887; rpt. (New York: Random, 1974); pp. 229-30.

Chorus, is pursued by the "youth" in the "Prelude." However unavailing the objective--freedom--may prove to be, commitment to the quest suffices to secure meaning and purpose. By authentically engaging itself in this venture, the "soul" asserts itself. The "Epilogue" of Songs before Sunrise evokes its "Prelude":

So the soul seeking through the dark
Heavenward, a dove without an ark,
Transcends the unnavigable sea
Of years that wear out memory;
So calls, a sunward-singing lark,
In the ear of souls that should be free;
So points them toward the sun for mark
Who steer not for the stress of waves,
And seek strange helmsmen, and are slaves. (II, 236)

Thus are the meaninglessness, chaos and purposelessness of existence abated. A life-long engagement into meaningful "action" fostered by an emancipated "thought" and directed towards "freedom"; an existential self-reliance rather than the relegation of the self to "strange helmsmen"; these are Swinburne's assets over nothingness and chaos; these are the constituents of the Existential revolt.

Conclusion

Swinburne's predilection for dramatizing theistic perspectives has generated a critical tendency to regard the poet as an inverted or preverted theist. And yet, in his correspondence, from 1861 on, the poet openly and unequivocally avers his atheism. In an effort to reconcile Swinburne's avowed conviction that "God" is but a figment of the imagination, an oppressive construct, with the dramatic acknowledgments of a "God" in his early poetry, the exemplar of Swinburne's dramatized theistic perspectives--Atalanta in Calydon--has been probed.

A scrutiny of Atalanta has revealed that Swinburne's "theological" attitude was not that of an inverted theist, but that of an iconoclast. The poet, emulating Blake, Sade and Shelley, employed the theistic perspective to expose and shatter an icon, not a God; he manipulated this perspective in such a way as to display its absurdity, demonstrate its inviability, and imply the spuriousness of its object. In elucidating Swinburne's iconoclastic method in Atalanta, light is shed on all those poems--particularly in Poems and Ballads, First Series--in which a theistic perspective is established; whether the contrived point of view is Christian, as in "Laus Veneris," or Classical, as in "Anactoria."

Swinburne was an iconoclast; and yet, in a well-known poem of Songs before Sunrise, it seems that the poet has given vent to the very impulse against which he crusaded; for "Hertha" is the product of a mythopoeic imagination; that which is responsible for the erection of gods.

Swinburne's mythopoeia may, however, be justified by acknowledging two aspects of his personality: the "pagan" and the "poetic," and recognizing their interrelatedness.

Swinburne's poetic propensity for allegorization--which may be confirmed by a glance into any one of his volumes of poetry, or even in his earliest writings--is associable with his reputed penchant for paganism. It was not the poet's "religious" instinct, but his "poetic" instinct, which found therein a colourful panoply of animated passions and corporealized abstractions. Moreover, was not the pagan object of deification, the human being, rather than some nebulous and oppressive omnipotence? The pagan mentality was also congenial to Swinburne's physical and intellectual constitution in that it did not prudishly select virtuous or idyllic traits to ascribe to its human-like deities; the pagans viewed as divine, and thus irreproachable, the lustiness of Venus, the homosexual meanderings of Apollo and the epicene nature of Hermaphroditus. Human nature was thereby unqualifying deified.

Swinburne's own inclination to allegorize, or anthropomorphize, human qualities or sentiments as well as those abstractions which import to human existence stems, then, from both his pagan and poetic impulses.¹ Both the poet and the pagan in Swinburne are responsible for his indefatigable personifications of Love, Strength, Thought, Truth, Life, Time, Death, Freedom, Humanity. To believe that in "Hertha" Swinburne embodied a God would be analogous to considering him as an authentic votary of Proserpine

1

It may be contended that the mythopoeic imagination is fundamentally poetic. The converse, however, requires qualification; for the poetic imagination is not always of a mythopoeic nature, albeit its aspiration is probably unexceptionably of that order.

or Venus--his "allegories" of death and love--and, furthermore, to negating the imaginative license of poetry.

The line is often tenuous, in some works, between the imaginative and the philosophical. It may be said of Nietzsche, for instance, that his "Superman" springs from a "philosophic imagination" (the converse perspective would see it as the product of an "imaginative philosophy," as perhaps are Heidegger's "Being" and Auguste Comte's "Humanity"). Although it may certainly be claimed of Swinburne's grossly neglected philosophy that it was a masterpiece of lucidity, equilibrium and cogency, with which no nineteenth-century British philosophical or poetical work could vie, Swinburne's expression is unequivocally that of a poet. In the same way that the poet in Nietzsche dramatically personified the human will to power and perfection in his "Superman," so the poet in Swinburne anthropomorphized the human will to self-assertion and freedom in "Hertha."

Swinburne was an iconoclast, but like Nietzsche, he would not depart from the premises in which he had performed his act, without first sweeping away the pieces of the shattered idol. And rather than leave humanity in its perennially prostrate position, he made sure to erect it before he left, and in so doing, directed its gaze toward Freedom.

The Classical, iconoclastic and atheistic Existential discourses in Atalanta in Calydon are all incumbent on a single rhetoric. The polysemy of this rhetoric as well as necessary shifts in perspective, render these three discourses independently intelligible. In contrast to the semantic reciprocity which was shown to unite all of Atalanta's discourses, the

three ramifications of the theological discourse do not thematically coalesce, but rather, supersede each other, thereby translating an intellectual evolution.

In the Classical discourse, Swinburne presents the archetypal theistic perspective; in the iconoclastic discourse, he conveys his attitude towards that perspective; and in the atheistic discourse, articulates his personal Weltanschauung. From the religious or theistic point of view, this will certainly not be recognized as an intellectual evolution or progression, but the atheistic mind will unequivocally regard it as such. For Atalanta's tripartite discourse reflects the atheistic vision of the historical phases in the evolution of the intellect: the supercession of the theistic mentality by the iconoclastic mind, which, once the toppling of idols is integrally effected, in turn, yields to the atheistic Existential intellect. This progression, adumbrated in the tripartite "theological" discourse of Atalanta, is expounded throughout Swinburne's entire poetic corpus. In "The Altar of Righteousness," a poem in Swinburne's last volume of poetry (A Chancel Passage, and Other Poems), the poet traces this intellectual evolution:

All the storms of time, and wrath of many winds,
 may carve no trace
 'On the viewless altar, though the veil bear many
 and name and face:
 Many a live God's likeness woven, many a scripture
 dark with awe
 Bids the veil seem verier iron than the word of
 life's own law.
 Till the might of change hath rent it with a
 rushing wind in twain,
 Stone or steel it seems, whereon the wrath of chance
 is wreaked in vain:
 Stone or steel, and all behind it or beyond its
 lifted sign
 Cloud and vapour, no subsistence of a change--
 unstricken shrine.

God by god flits past in thunder, till his glories
 turn to shades:
 God to god hears wondering witness how his gospel
 flames and fades.
 More was each of these, while yet they were, than
 man their servant seemed:
 Dead are all these, and man survives who made them
 while he dreamed. (VI, 305)

And in another poem of the same volume, "The Lake of Gaube," Swinburne prescribes the Existential attitude:

Whose thought has fathomed and measured
 The darkness of life and death,
 The secret within them treasured,
 The spirit that is not breath?
 Whose vision has yet beholden
 The splendour of death and of life?
 Though sunset as dawn be golden,
 Is the word of them peace, not strife?
 Deep silence answers: the glory
 We dream of may be but a dream,
 And the sun of the soul wax hoary
 As ashes that show not a gleam.
 But well shall it be with us ever
 Who drive through the darkness here,
 If the soul that we live by never,
 For aught that a lie saith, fear. (VI, 286-7)

Swinburne's crusade against those "centuries of burning and trembling belief"; his hope that "Time, and truth his child, though terror set earth and heaven at odds," will "See the light of manhood rise on the twilight of the Gods" ("Altar of Righteousness", VI, 315-19) had, since Atalanta; assumed an irreversible Existential nature. Excepting Lang, who says of Swinburne, that "It is possible, and even tempting, to read Swinburne in his later phases as a kind of existentialist" (Introd., Letters, XXVI), critics have never heeded the Existential voice of his poetry. With the present reconsideration of Atalanta in Calydon, atheistic Existentialism should be acknowledged as constituting Swinburne's *Weltanschauung* from 1863 to the end of his life. Atalanta is the blue-print of Swinburne's

philosophy: its Classical, iconoclastic and atheistic Existential discourses will be reiterated by Swinburne throughout his poetic career as he relentlessly exhorts humanity to revoke its theism and assert itself.

In his observation of the human intellect, Swinburne was too lucid for his contemporaries; and in his projection of the capacity of that intellect, he was certainly too optimistic.² But he never relented and never lost his confidence in humanity. Only sometimes, would Swinburne get impatient as he, the atheistic Existentialist, was obliged, by the desolating stagnation of the human intellect still vastly immersed in theism, to utter iconoclastic words:

How long--for haply not now much longer--
 Shall fear put faith in a faithless creed,
 And shapes and shadows of truths be stronger
 In strong men's eyes than the truth indeed?
 If freedom be not a word that dies when spoken,
 If justice be not a dream whence men must wake,
 How shall not the bonds of the thralldom of old be broken,
 And right put might in the hands of them that break?
 For clear as a tocsin from the steeple
 Is the cry gone forth along the land,
 Take heed, ye unwise among the people:
 O ye fools, when will ye understand?

("A Word from the Psalmist", VI, 114)

2

Even the present century is still predominantly inattentive to the atheistic viewpoint, as evidenced by the appreciated but unavailing efforts of Bertrand Russell. In "What Can a Free Man Worship?" Russell's interpretation of the phases of the intellect and his proposal for a final, atheistic Existential phase, could certainly be seen as having been inspired by Swinburne. But the theistic intellect is, today, no more endangered by Russell than it had been, in the nineteenth century, by Swinburne.

The concept "God" has been the greatest
objection to existence hitherto . . .
We deny God, we deny responsibility in
God: thus alone do we save the world.

Friedrich Nietzsche
The Twilight of the Idols

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